

China

T O U R I S M

JULY 1993

157

13TH

ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL

FOLLOWING IN MARCO POLO'S FOOTSTEPS



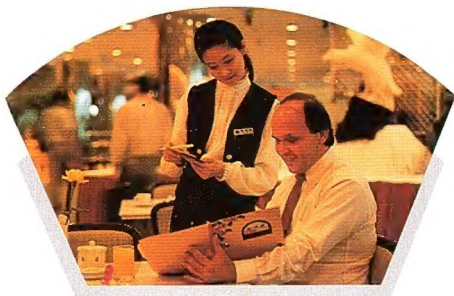


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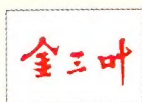
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Following in the Footsteps of Marco Polo

Over 700 years have passed since Marco Polo left his home of Venice, Italy in 1271 to join his uncle and father on their historic journey into Yuan Dynasty China. Until that time the land known as Cathay was nothing more than a myth, a fairy tale, to the Western world. Marco Polo's book *The Travels* provided a wealth of material on this mysterious region, and is still widely read today.

There has been some controversy over the accuracy and truthfulness of Marco Polo's accounts, with some scholars claiming that it is either pure fiction or was gleaned from other sources. This special issue of CHINA TOURISM, in celebration of our 13th anniversary, aims in part to explore this question.

Our reporters spent 80 days following Marco Polo's northern route, comparing his accounts of life under Mongol rule with the China that exists today. We hope that our readers enjoys this fascinating look at China's past and present, and that it will perhaps even serve as inspiration for all the future Marco Polos of the world!

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FROM THE PAMIRS TO BEIJING — TRACING

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Today, the people in Kashi are just as active in trading and producing handicrafts as they were in Marco Polo's time, as witnessed by their weekly bazaars which are attended by over 100,000 people.



PART THREE

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38

Called Khotan in Marco Polo's time, this ancient city is best known for its exquisite carpets and silks, still made on a household basis with only the simplest machinery.



PART FOUR

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48

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This stretch of our journey took us over 800 kilometres across yet more desert until we reached Dunhuang. Along the way we saw the ruins of ancient cities that flourished during Marco Polo's time, now buried deep beneath the desert sands.



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MARCO POLO'S NORTHERN ROUTE



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One of nature's remarkable gifts, the Hexi Corridor is a fertile stretch of land bordered by desert to the north and the Qilian Mountains to the south, which have been providing water for centuries to the many ancient towns along the Silk Road.



PART SEVEN Traversing the Ancient Land of the Western Xia 74

The region around the Helan Mountains and the Yellow River was once the site of the Western Xia Kingdom. One still sees many reminders of the Western Xia here: emperors' tombs, ancient pagodas and rock paintings.



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This part of our journey used to be covered in pine forests and teeming with wildlife, but is now solid desert, and only recently two major lakes dried up and have all but disappeared.



PART NINE The Ancient Ordos Plateau 96

Travelling through the desert at night, we lost our way and had to change our plans. It was a blessing in disguise, however, because we happened across the set for a new movie called *Marco Polo*, and also paid a visit to Genghis Khan's Mausoleum.



PART TEN Visiting the Yuan Capitals of Shang-tu and Khan-balik 106

The first capital of the Yuan Dynasty, Shang-tu, was in today's Inner Mongolia, and later an even grander capital was constructed in Beijing, then called Khan-balik. We arrived in Beijing in October, the same time of year that Marco Polo first arrived.

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Director: Tchan Fou-li

Vice Director: Wang Miao

Vice General Managers:

Zhang Guorong, Liu Pit Mui,

Li Guang Jie

Editor-in-Chief: Wang Miao

Director of Foreign Languages

Editorial Dept.: Kuang Wen Dong

Editors: Roberta Raine, Wallace Tse

Director of Art Dept.:

Cheung Yun Ming

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FROM THE PAMIRS TO BEIJING

Tracing Marco Polo's Northern Route

The story of Marco Polo's journey across the vast land of China has entertained and informed generations of people all over the world since it was first published nearly 700 years ago. Being exploration enthusiasts, we had long indulged in the romantic dream of one day identifying and tracing Marco Polo's route through northern China.

Marco Polo chose the most perilous route possible from Venice to China, a country still shrouded in mystery and myth in the Western world. His incredible adventures in Asia and the book he wrote made this Italian merchant world famous. Upon its publication, *The Travels of Marco Polo* created a furore throughout Europe, and is still widely consulted today.

In the sections related to China, Marco Polo described in vivid detail the society, people, customs, local products and important events existing in China during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). However, not being a guidebook it does not give any account of the specific route the traveller took, measuring distances by how many days it took to go from one place to the next. This deficiency was exactly what we so desperately needed in order to plan our journey.

Thanks to Prof. Li Han of Wuhan University, who provided us with many useful materials, and Prof. Yang Zhijiu, an expert on Marco Polo at Nankai University in Tianjin, we managed to piece together enough information to follow his route.

Nevertheless, today it is physically impossible to completely follow in the steps of Marco Polo, because over the past 700 years the topography in this part of the world has changed a great deal. Due to the southerly movement of the deserts and the fact that many rivers have changed course, his original route has long since disappeared and a new one has come into existence.

For these reasons, we could only approximately trace Marco Polo's route, a route which he traversed by horse and camel, while we had the modern comfort of a car. On a mid-summer day we began our journey by jeep from Kunjirap Pass in the Pamir Highland. Travelling eastward we passed through Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia and Hebei. When we arrived at our final destination of Beijing, it was autumn and yellow leaves carpeted the ground.

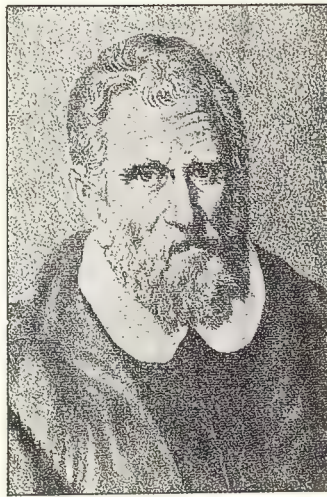
Our 12,000-kilometre route started from a plateau over 4,000 metres above sea level and ended in the North China Plain at an altitude of less than 200 metres. Along the way we met Tajiks, Kirghiz, Uygurs, Yugurs, Tus, Huis, Mongols and Hans, observed their life styles, and saw the different scenery each region has to offer.

Covering such a long distance in only 80 days was no easy task, even with today's excellent communication and travel facilities. It is hard to imagine the difficulties Marco Polo faced 700 years ago making a journey of over 5,000 kilometres without the modern conveniences that we now all take for granted. However, through his book we are afforded a glimpse into what it must have been like in those days, and his travelogue remains an important and unique historical document. More than that, it provides would-be adventurers like ourselves with inspiration and motivation to continue the task that he began.

Marco Polo's Route from the Pamirs to Beijing







Did Marco Polo Really Visit China?

TEXT BY CHAPMAN LEE

There can be no doubt that Marco Polo was an extraordinary man. Not only did he travel beyond the conventional boundaries of that time for European travellers, but also lived as a foreigner in China for 17 years, under the protection of the Great Kublai Khan. As if this were not remarkable enough, upon his return to his own country he was promptly put into prison, where he wrote *The Travels*, a book that would change the course of history for ever.

During his 17 years in China, Marco Polo was appointed an official of the imperial government, according to *The Travels*. In this capacity, he travelled all over China and was sent on diplomatic missions to Japan, Burma, Vietnam, Siam, Java, Sumatra and India. If this is all true, Marco Polo was the first European to extensively travel throughout China and other Asian countries and leave a written record of his experiences.

In 1291, the Polos were asked to join an escort party in charge of delivering a Mongolian princess who was to marry the Persian king, their last mission for the Yuan emperor. They boarded at Quanzhou port, sailed via Persia and returned to Venice after an absence of 24 years.

Back home, Marco Polo began to set up a business in Venice. A war unexpectedly broke out between Venice and Genoa, and he was taken captive in a sea battle while serving as a warship captain in 1298.

The Genoese prison was the birthplace of Marco Polo's *The Travels*. There he met Rustichello, a writer from Pisa with whom he shared a cell. With plenty of time on their hands, the two began a collaboration that would astonish the world.

The strange tales related in *The Travels* caused a great sensation in Europe, and although it was attacked by some as a pack of lies, it still enjoyed great popularity. *The Travels* served as inspiration for both merchants and adventurers, who regarded Asia as a mysterious land full of promise. It even fired the imagination of no less a person than Christopher Columbus, who treasured his well-thumbed copy. In his diary, Columbus more than once referred to *The Travels* and how the book had given him ideas to plan his eastern expedition.

Since publication of *The Travels*, many of the incredible stories related in the book have been confirmed, and it has continued to enjoy great popularity. Its value in understanding life during the Yuan Dynasty is unquestionable, but at the same time much controversy has surrounded the book as well. At first the arguments were over the accuracy of its details, however nowadays an even larger question is being considered: did Marco Polo ever actually visit China, or is the book based entirely on hearsay and rumour?

The debate among scholars revolves around several points of contention. Firstly, if Marco Polo were really so highly regarded by Kublai Khan, and was given a high position as an official in the

imperial government, why wasn't his name mentioned in any of the vast historical records of the Yuan Dynasty? Furthermore, if Marco Polo had really been to China and was familiar with Chinese culture, why did he fail to mention both Chinese tea and Chinese characters — two products typical of Chinese culture — in *The Travels*?

There is also no description about printing — one of China's great inventions, and there are many questionable figures and events which cannot be verified. Marco Polo was even wrong about the family tree of the Mongolian emperor. Lastly, many Chinese place names were spelled in Persian. Why didn't Marco Polo use Chinese spellings if he had really been to China?

The above four questions support the arguments of some scholars who believe that Marco Polo had never been to China. The early 19th-century German scholar K. D. Hüllmann regarded *The Travels* as a mere church legend, a poorly designed travel book for missionaries and merchants.

In 1965, Herbert Franke, a German historian, cast doubt on two passages in the book about "offering new guns to attack Xiangyang" and about Marco Polo being a "three-year high official in Yangzhou". Marco Polo said in *The Travels* that a new weapon — a stone-throwing machine used to attack the city of Xiangyang — was created according to advice from himself and his father. In fact, it was in the first and second months of 1273 that the Yuan troops conquered Xiangyang, and at that time, Marco Polo was still on his way to China.

In addition, records in the Chinese *Yuan History* and Persian *History Collections* show that the new weapon was designed by a man named Ismail, a Muslim who had recently come back from Persia. The weapon was thus called a "Muslim Gun" and clearly had no relation to the Polos whatsoever. Moreover, no evidence has been found in the *Yuan History* or in the local chronicles of Yangzhou to prove that Marco Polo was a high official there for three years. Therefore there is reason to doubt the truthfulness of some parts of the book.

Then in 1979 J. W. Heager, an American scholar, put forth a new argument. He said that Marco Polo had really been to China, but he only visited the places around Beijing, certainly not as many places as he described in *The Travels*, let alone going on diplomatic missions to neighbouring Asian countries. Mr. Hea-

ger suggested that Marco Polo probably heard the stories about other places in China from local officials who came to the Yuan court. He also believed that Marco Polo had never become a high official in his 17 years in China, nor was he regarded highly by Kublai Khan. He was an attendant of honour and his job was to go between Beijing and Kaiping (Shangtu), take part in hunting and tell European stories to the Great Khan.

Despite the inaccuracies, most scholars today accept that Marco Polo did in fact go to China, but also accept that *The Travels* is not 100 per cent accurate.

The Chinese historian Yang Zhijiu, a specialist in Yuan history, has spent his whole life in the research of Islamic history and in gathering first-hand material about Yuan history. In 1941, Professor Yang found in the *Yongle Dictionary - Jingshi Dictionary - Zhanchi* important historical data, which proved that Marco Polo had come to China. The document said that three diplomatic envoys sent to China by the Persian king were returning to their own country, and there was also a note about the grain rations for the three and their companions.

The key point here is the names of the three envoys. It is mentioned in two chapters in *The Travels* that the wife of the Persian king Argon had died and that the king sent three envoys to China to ask Kublai Khan to bestow upon him a new wife of the same nationality as his dead wife. As the three envoys were about to leave for home, the Polos were asked to join the escort party to take Princess Cocachin to Persia by sea. The three envoys in *The Travels* were named Oulatai, Apousca and Coja. Professor Yang found the corresponding Chinese names of the three envoys in *Zhanchi*.

The same event was mentioned in both Chinese and Persian histories, and the names of the envoys were the same as in *The Travels*. This could not be a coincidence. That is to say, though Marco Polo's name was not directly mentioned in the Yuan historical records (very possibly because of his low rank), other important evidence has been found to prove that the Polos left China in 1291. Since their departure was mentioned, there can be no doubt that they were there.

Professor Yang has also been able to refute some of the arguments put forth by scholars who believed that *The Travels* were not true.

Firstly, he said, Marco Polo was an ordinary person, not a man of letters nor a historian. He had not had any higher edu-

cation (he was only a teenager when he left home), therefore we cannot expect the book to be up to the standards of historians today. Secondly, the book was written in prison with no other reference materials available. It is possible that figures and details mentioned in the book might be wrong, since the book was written several years after Marco Polo's departure from China. It is understandable that there might have been some mistakes and exaggerations.

As for the fact that Chinese tea, Chinese characters and the invention of printing were not mentioned in *The Travels*, Professor Yang says that Marco Polo mainly stayed among the Mongols and people from the Western Regions, and had very little contact with the Han people. The Mongols and the people from the Western Regions did not have the habit of drinking tea as the Han people did, so of course he did not consider it worthy of mention, if indeed he saw it at all.

In addition, in Marco Polo's time China was under the rule of the Mongols and the language used in court was Mongolian. Many kingdoms in the Western Regions had become subordinate states to Kublai Khan, and had an important role in the political, economic and social life in the Yuan court. The languages used among diplomatic envoys were Persian or Turkic, not Chinese, therefore it is very possible that Marco Polo knew nothing about the Chinese language. This is why Marco Polo did not mention anything about Chinese characters, and the names of places were mainly spelled in Persian,

Mongolian or Turkic. The "advice of using new guns to attack Xiangyang", Professor Yang thinks, was indeed a lie and the "three-year high official in China" was a statement which could not be confirmed by any existing evidence.

Translated by Xu Mingqiang

Shown here is the first printed edition of *The Travels of Marco Polo*, published in German in 1477. On the cover is a drawing of Marco Polo as a youth, with the words, "This is a portrait of the great Venetian traveller Marco Polo, who witnessed many extraordinary wonders of the world never seen before, and recorded them here for posterity." (1, by Shi Bao Xiu)

Seven hundred years after this portrait was done, people are still debating the question of whether or not Marco Polo really did go to China, or whether all he wrote was pure fabrication (2, by Chen Zhi'an).

This is one of the illustrations included in a French hand-written edition of *The Travels* produced in 1400. In the picture Marco Polo is handing over to Kublai Khan a letter from the Pope and the lamp oil taken from Jesus Christ's tomb. Marco is kneeling in the middle, and his father and uncle are behind him (3, by Shi Bao Xiu).

Marco Polo died in 1324 in Venice, Italy, leaving behind his last will and testament. Today this piece of paper is considered a treasure by scholars doing research into the life of Marco Polo (4, by Shi Bao Xiu).

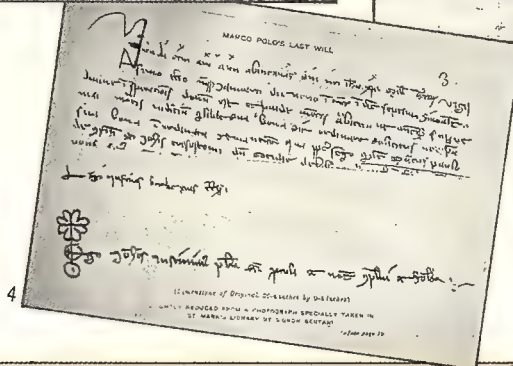
This is the house that belonged to the Polo family. However, after being away for 24 years, upon their return none of the three Polos could even recognize it (5, by Shi Bao Xiu).



3



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4

PART ONE



Beginning in the Pamir Highland

When the traveller leaves this place (Wakhan) he goes ... through mountains all the time, climbing so high that this is said to be the highest place in the world....

This plain, whose name is Pamir, extends fully twelve days' journey. In all these twelve days there is no habitation or shelter, but travellers must take their provisions with them. No birds fly here because of the height and the cold....

There are great quantities of wild sheep of huge size. Their horns grow to as much as six palms in length and are never less than three or four....

The inhabitants live very high up in the mountains. They are idolaters and utter savages, living entirely by the chase and dressed in the skins of beast.

... because of this great cold, fire is not so bright here ... and food does not cook well.

— *The Travels of Marco Polo*

Four of the world's great mountain chains, the Tianshan, Kunlun, Karakorum and Hindu Kush, converge in China's western borders to create the Pamir Highland. It was from here that Marco Polo and his companions first entered the land of China centuries ago.

Now 700 years later at Kunjirap Pass on the Sino-Pakistani border, a thoroughfare leads across the same barren mountains, via which busloads of business people and tourists come into China every day. Travellers today still have to suffer some of the hardships — the cold and the problems due to lack of oxygen — that Marco Polo had to endure, but for only a few hours rather than 12 days.

The barbarous tribes written about by Marco Polo no longer exist. Instead, the area is inhabited by the Tajiks, who follow the Islamic faith. They love to sing and dance and are very hospitable and kind. One similarity with olden days is that they raise the same kind of super-long-horned sheep that Marco Polo once saw.

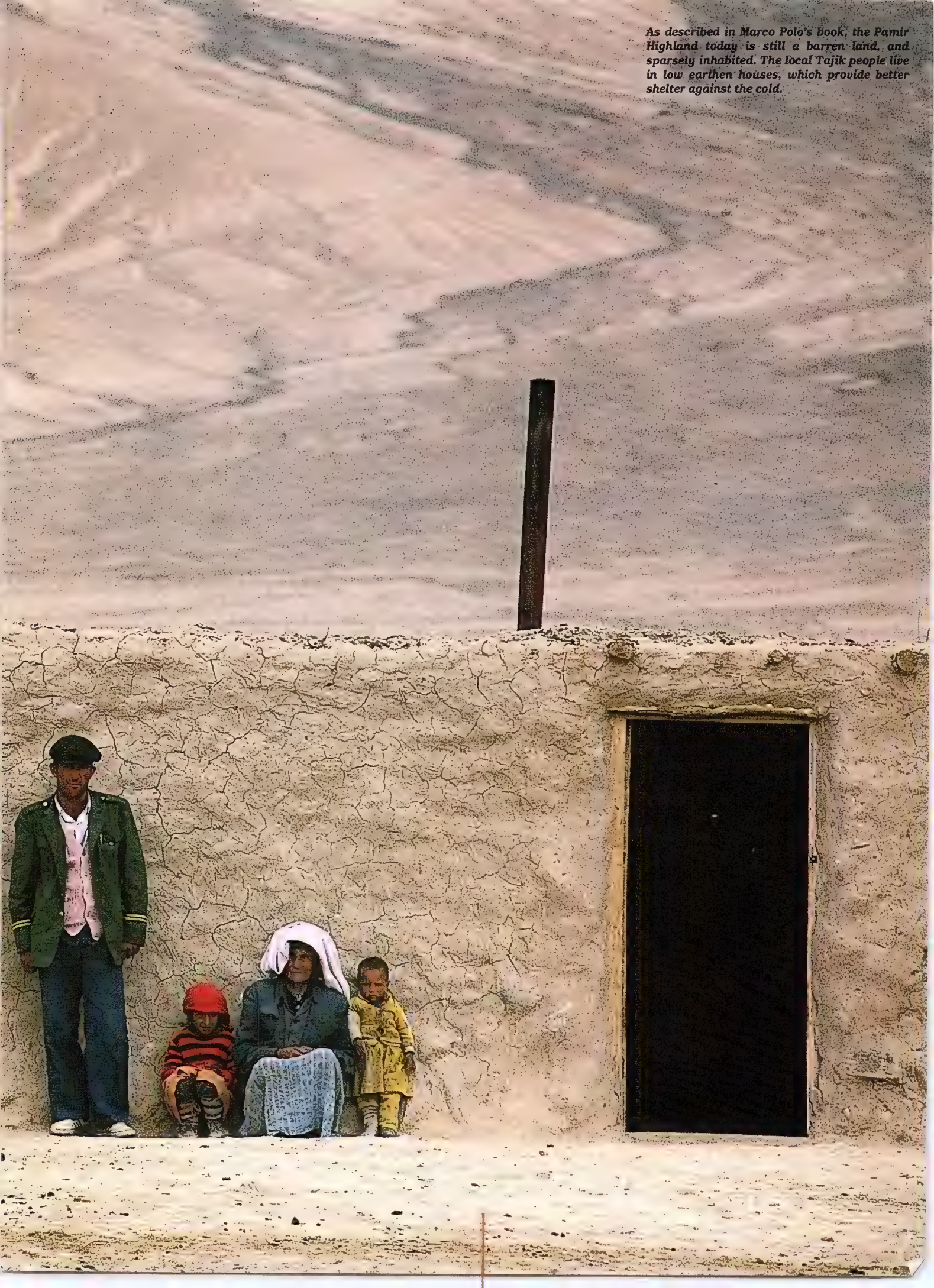
Along the way, we passed many of the ancient post stations, lakes, rivers and mountains that Marco Polo described in his book *The Travels of Marco Polo*. We also ran into a group of foreigners trying to climb a great mountain peak mentioned by Marco Polo in his book. Coincidentally, they turned out to be from Italy, compatriots of Marco Polo.

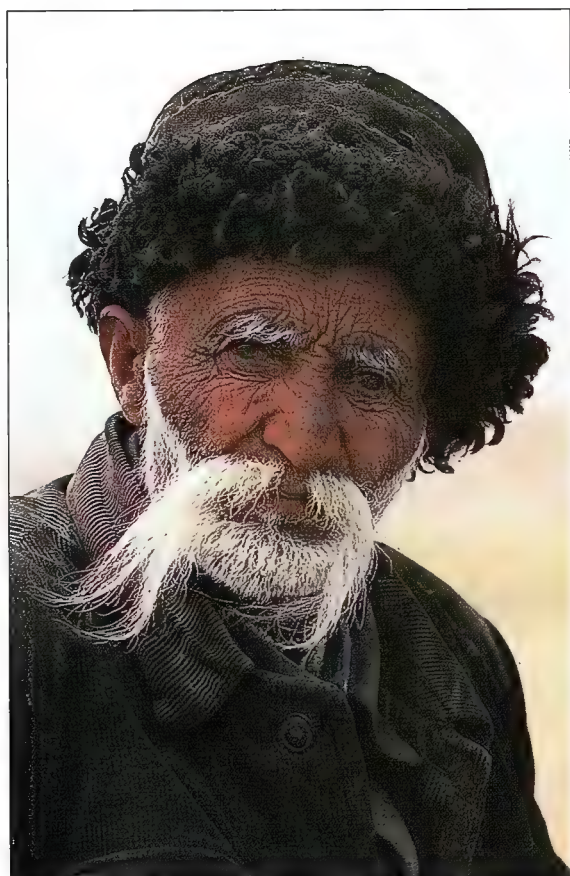
Every year in late autumn, Tajik herdsmen move from their summer highland pastures to the valleys to spend the long winter (1). In ancient times the Pamir Highland was an important passageway between China and the West (2).





As described in Marco Polo's book, the Pamir Highland today is still a barren land, and sparsely inhabited. The local Tajik people live in low earthen houses, which provide better shelter against the cold.





1



2

Throughout Chinese history, travellers to the Western Regions and India have had to pass through the Pamir Highland. Zhang Qian, an envoy sent by the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220) to the Western Regions and the famous Buddhist monk Xuan Zang (Tripitaka) of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) both had to surmount this cold and inhospitable highland.

Seven centuries later, we found ourselves following in the footsteps of such venerable explorers, although we had the benefit of a car to take us into the Pamirs. Though it was towards the end of August when we arrived, it felt like autumn on the highland, which is an average of 4,000 metres above sea level.

Along the Gez River, the smooth, asphalt surface of State Highway 314 runs between the capital city of Ürümqi and the border town of Taxkorgan on the Chinese side. Occasionally we would see luxurious coaches coming from the Kunjirap Pass, carrying Pakistanis, mostly businessmen, on their way to the city of Kashi.

Brilliant Lakes and Snowy Mountain Scenery

At 7:00 in the evening we came to the banks of Karakuli Lake. The weather was unusually beautiful and the sky a brilliant blue. The lake is extremely deep, fed by water melted from the ice and snow coming down from the mountains. On the other side of the lake stands a solemn, massive mountain called Muztagata. The reflection of the sun on the snow-covered mountain was so bright it was difficult to open our eyes.

At a height of 7,546 metres above sea level, the peak is one of the tallest in the Kunlun Mountain range. It is crowned with ice and snow that has been accumulating for ages, and just the solid ice alone is estimated to be over 200 metres thick. When the mountain is seen from afar, it appears stately and majestic, but when

seen close-up, it is even more impressive. No wonder its name, Muztagata, in the Tajik language means "Father of All Ice Mountains".

Standing by the lake opposite Muztagata is the tallest peak on the Pamir Highland, called the Kongur, rising 7,719 metres above sea level. It too is covered with snow and ice all year round, and the glaciers that move slowly down its slopes send out dazzling lights like cascading waterfalls.

The grassland by the lake was dotted with beautifully-coloured tents, temporary living quarters that the local tourist bureau had prepared for its guests. To sleep by the lake on the highland is without doubt a special experience.

Mountaineers Climbing the Kongur

Not far from our tent were five small tents occupied by mountaineers belonging to the Xinjiang Mountaineering Association. They had been there already for three months, and thanks to warm temperatures and good weather, several teams had already made it to the top of the mountain.

We discovered, through binoculars borrowed from the mountaineers, two small black dots on the mountain. They stood out clearly against the snowy background. We learned that they were called the Number Three Camp, and were currently at an altitude of 4,500 metres above sea level. It is from this spot that mountaineers make their final attempt to reach the summit. Karakuli Lake, where we were staying, was 3,600 metres above sea level.

At the lakeside we met some Italians who were amateur mountaineers, but without the training or equipment of professionals, they had failed to reach the summit. When we said

goodbye to Marco Polo's countrymen, the sun was just setting. The chilly air sent us shivering with cold, and we had to quickly put on our down jackets.

Temperatures here certainly have not changed much since Marco Polo's time, and at night it can drop as low as -25°C . In the darkness of our tent, the outside world was utterly quiet. There was no television or radio, and all that could be heard was our own breathing and the sound of our clothes rubbing together.

The Tajiks: Chinese Europeans

The next day we arrived at the county town of Taxkorgan. The only street in town had few pedestrians or animal-driven carts, and motor vehicles were even rarer. Not surprisingly, the town is described as a place where there is "only one street, one light and one loudspeaker, which can be heard all over town".

The Tajiks and Russians are the only two ethnic groups in China that are of European origin, with long, straight noses, deep-set brown eyes and black hair. Of the total Chinese Tajik population of over 26,000, more than half make their home in Taxkorgan. At the Tagarma grazing ground, we saw a group of very charming kids with brownish hair, blue eyes and white complexions, the skin colour the Tajiks are born with. As they grow up, their skin will gradually turn a dark red under the highland sunshine. Their habit of kissing each other when they meet is perhaps a vestige of their European cultural heritage.

The spoken language of the Tajiks belongs to the eastern Persian branch of Indo-European languages. As they have no written language of their own, their history used to be recorded using the Persian script, but now Uyghur or Han Chinese is more common. Animal husbandry is the major means of making a living for the Islamic Tajiks.

They call themselves the descendants of eagles, saying that only eagles and the Tajiks can live freely and happily in the harsh conditions of the Pamir Highland. One of their favourite pastimes is the eagle dance, in which they stretch out their arms and flap them as if they are eagles soaring in the sky. Their dance is accompanied by a tune that sounds like eagles crying, played on short flutes made from eagle bones. Very high-pitched and loud, the flute music can travel far and wide on the vast highland.

An Ancient Stone City

As the sun began to shine over the Pamir Highland at 10:00 a.m., we got up. Here, so long as you do not look at your watch, you will not notice much of a time difference. However, once you do look, you realize the sun rises sometimes as late as noon and only sets at 11:00 p.m.! Located at 75 degrees longitude, this place is at the westernmost end of Chinese territory. On the opposite side of China, Fuyuan and Raohe in Heilongjiang Province are the most eastern towns, at 135 degrees longitude. The difference between the two extremes is 60 degrees, which means that there is a time difference of five hours.

The Tajik people, like the Russians, are descendants of Europeans, therefore their features are notably different from China's other nationalities (1 & 2). A Pakistani frontier guard welcomes the authors with wild flowers (3). A Sino-Pakistani boundary marker at Kunjirap Pass, 3,900 metres above sea level (4). Today businessmen and tourists from Pakistan have to go through frontier inspection before entering China (5).



3



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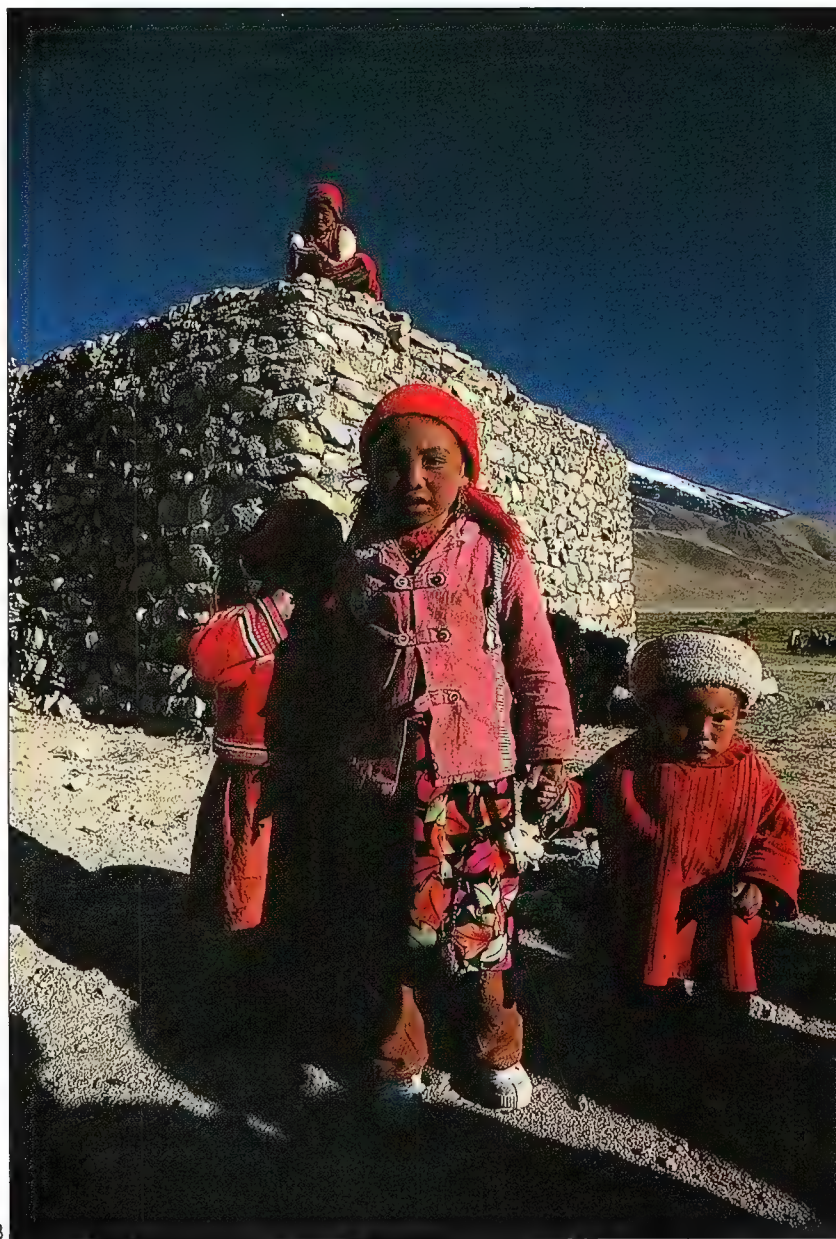


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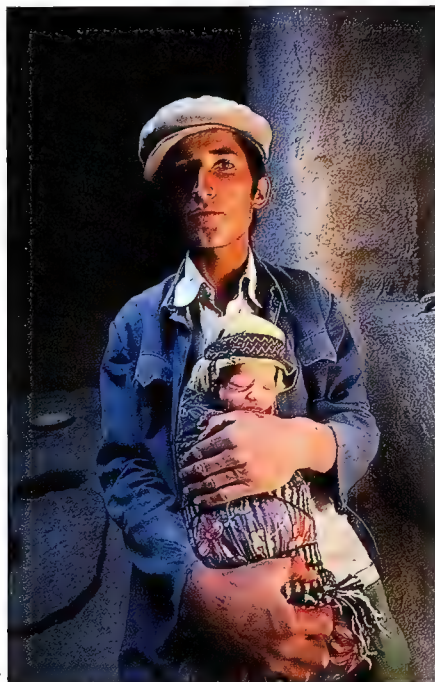
The saddle-shaped sacrificial offering set on top of Tajik tombs apparently serves as riding gear for the dead to use in the nether world (1). In this harsh and frigid climate, where many children do not make it to adulthood, each child is precious (2). The Kirghiz people live in stone houses, the roofs of which serve as sunning areas, much like Tibetan houses (3). The Tajik people are natives of the Pamirs and have been here for generations (4). The Kirghiz living on the lower plateau areas look quite different from the Tajiks, both in their facial features and in the way they dress (5). Calling themselves descendants of the eagle, the Tajiks learn how to do the Eagle Dance at an early age (6). The hard-working Tajik women often help the men herd sheep and cattle in addition to their household chores (7). It hardly ever rains on the Pamir Highland, so the roofs of Tajik houses are usually made of tree branches, which allow sunshine to come through (8). Visitors often suffer from altitude sickness due to the thin air on the plateau, but native-born children have no such problems (9).



1



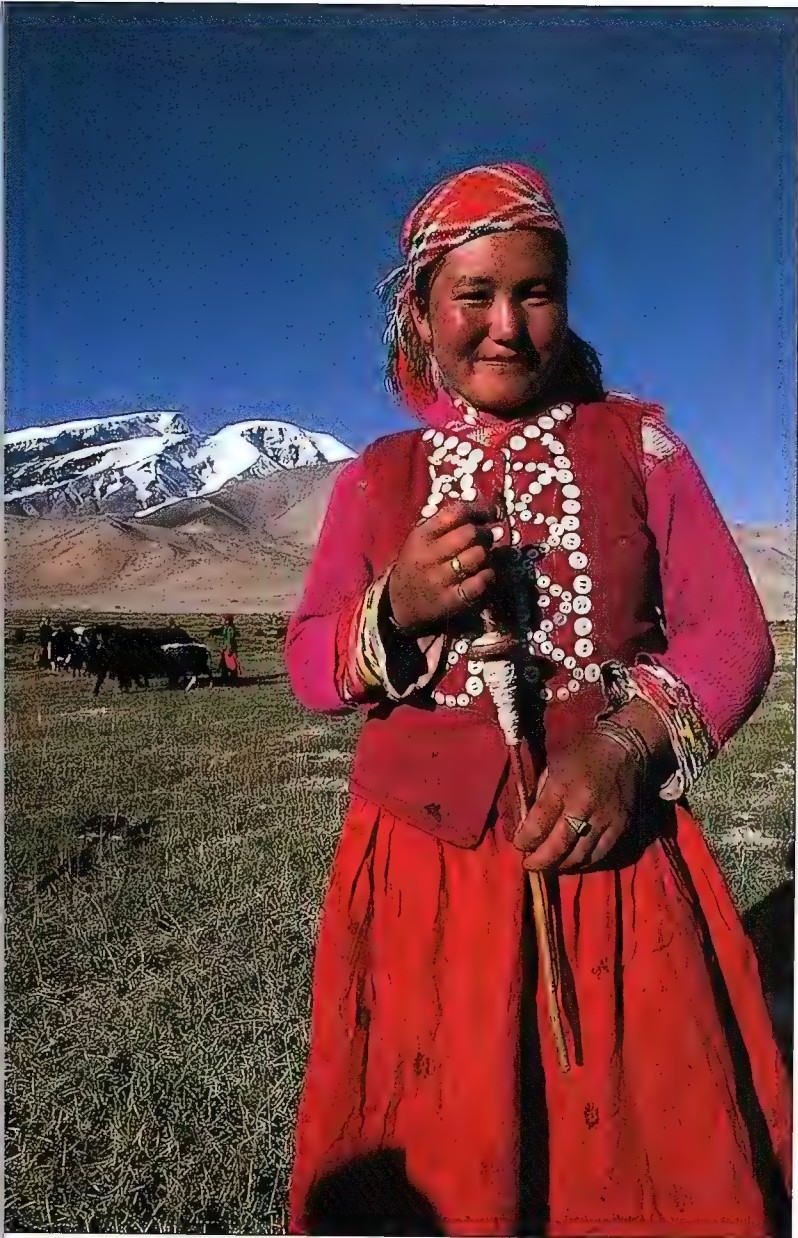
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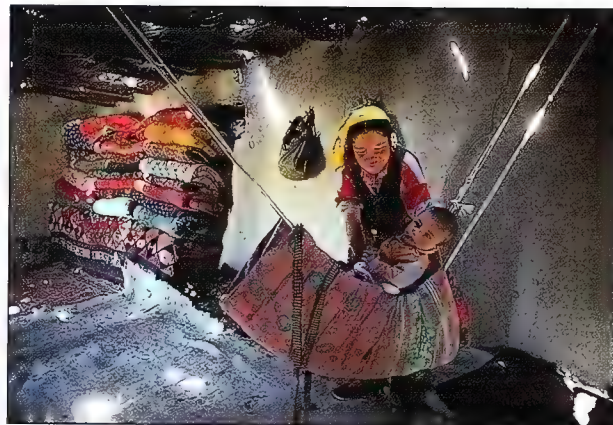
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In his book, Marco Polo wrote about the big-horned sheep that today still thrive in the region. Seen here are the cold-enduring yaks (1). As we descended the Pamir Highland, we passed herdsmen driving their camels with fodder for the winter months (2). Today crossing the Pamirs is almost as difficult as it was in Marco Polo's time (3). As Marco Polo wrote, one sees nothing here but the endless barren mountains, not even birds (4).

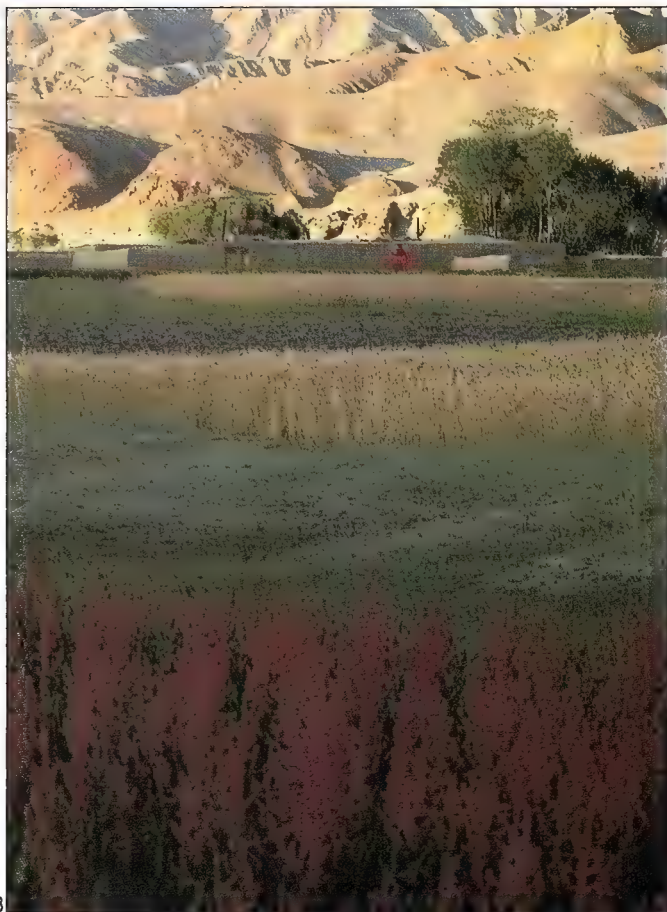




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From the backyard of our hotel in Taxkorgan, we climbed up to Stone City, said to have been built during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589). The city wall is more or less intact, and the corner tower can still be seen. Sections of a stone wall that rise and fall along with the terrain outside the ancient stronghold also still stand. Most probably the wall once served as an outer defence work. Inside the city, heaps of stones, possibly the rubble left over from houses, are piled here and there. Northwest of the city is a road which once led the way into the city. Standing on this road, which lies on a steep slope, we were struck by the biting coldness. In Stone City we wrapped ourselves up tight in our down jackets, but our hands and feet were still numb from the cold. The bright morning sunshine did not offer any warmth, however the air was pleasantly clean. Looking down on Taxkorgan below, the view was crystal clear.

Next, we drove south towards Kunjirap Pass. On the banks of the Taxkorgan River we saw a small pagoda built of earth, standing solitary beside the pebble-covered river. We went inside the hollow pagoda, which was about the size of one room. Our guide said that many structures like this could be found around here, but few were as well-preserved as this one. We learned that during the height of the Silk Road, these buildings served as "hotels", or post stations, for merchants and foreign envoys. We could not help wondering if perhaps Marco Polo had once spent a night in this earth room.

Making Our Way Up Kunjirap Pass

Heading towards this important mountain pass, we could not help thinking about all the ancient caravans that must have travelled in these same steps. When one considers that back then only the most basic means of transport were available, it is even more astounding that so many made it through. Apart from cold and hunger, travellers also had to endure complete solitude for up to two weeks at a time, spurred on only by their confidence and conviction in their endeavours, whatever they might be.

Before long, on one side of the even asphalt highway, a side road appeared leading westward. Covered in gravel, the road apparently had not been used for quite a long time. A companion from Kashi told us that the road led to Mingteke Pass, from where one could enter Afghan territory. However, due to the unstable political conditions in Afghanistan, the Mingteke border station was closed, thus the road was seldom used. He also told us that not far from the entrance to the road there is a hill on which stands an ancient fortress called Kizikorgan. It is strategically located at a fork in the road that leads to either Afghanistan or the Indian state of Kashmir.

We continued climbing uphill, and soon snow appeared on both sides of the road. As our car approached Kunjirap Pass, everyone in our car began to get slight headaches, effects of the high altitude. At the same time our car slowed down, for there was not enough oxygen at this altitude for the fuel to burn properly.

Our car groaned its way up the pass. At an altitude of 4,800 metres above sea level, this pass is in fact the lowest in the Karakorum Mountains. The effects of crossing mountain passes over 5,000 metres above sea level would be even more severe, possibly causing vomiting and loss of appetite. Fortunately, once we got over the pass and started descending to a lower altitude, we (and our car) returned to normal.

From the top of the pass we could see snow-capped mountains on all sides. Although the sun was shining brightly overhead, it did not make us feel any warmer. As we were enjoying the view, a mini-bus drove past us and stopped nearby. Two passengers jumped out with their cameras in hand and rushed over to the side of the road. Having only taken a couple of steps, without warning they both slowly dropped to their knees panting heavily, their faces deathly pale. They were helped back to the car after a long rest, and the mini-bus continued on its way. For newcomers to these

high mountains doing any kind of exercise, even walking briskly, can be dangerous.

The Official Start of Our Journey

We were finally at the top of Kunjirap Pass, where we would begin our journey following in the footsteps of Marco Polo. We had been here five years ago, and this time saw no striking changes in the area's appearance, except that there were a few more houses. There were more travellers coming across now than five years ago, which meant that more border officials were needed to man the pass, but everything else seemed little changed.

Over 20 kilometres beyond the pass, we came to the border of China and Pakistan, where a large boundary marker stood. Being 3,900 metres above sea level, the place was very cold even though it was only noon. The barren mountains were treeless, covered only with yellowish grass. Since the Pakistani border army men often come into close contact with the Chinese, they could speak some Mandarin. Though we had only just met, they treated us like old friends. One of them took off his triangular cap and military belt, put them on us and then had a picture taken with us, with the boundary marker as background. Just then we heard some high-spirited shouting and saw a Pakistani army officer coming towards us with a big bouquet of wild flowers, his face all smiles. What a nice way to start our long, 12,000-kilometre journey!

We saw no human settlements along the way to the Pamir Highland, but only two days down the plateau from Kunjirap, the road was full of people. Tajik families on donkeys were driving their sheep and oxen and had their yurts all packed up, leaving their summer highland pasture and heading for autumn pastures in the valleys.

Along the way we also saw many families putting up yurts. At the foot of Muztagata Peak, families would first build a wall and roof with sticks, add onto that a layer of reed matting, and finally cover it all with a layer of yak wool. In almost no time a small village of over a dozen yurts sprouted up. The tranquil valley was suddenly filled with life. Smoke from cooking fires rose up towards the sky, while women and children could be seen on the velvety grassland.

Having no toys whatsoever, the kids played with lambs from the family's sheep flock, while the women, like their counterparts in inland China, seemed always busy doing something. We walked up to some of them and found that they were doing embroidery on a Tajik hat. It seemed surprising that in these grey and cold surroundings, women of the Pamirs would produce such colourful embroidery, as if to make up for the shortcomings of the natural environment.

A Tajik Funeral

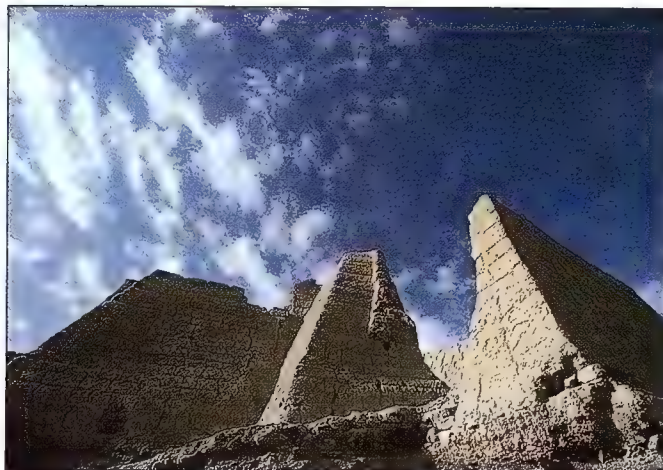
Soon after we drove out of Taxkorgan, we heard the sound of people crying. We stopped the car and walked in the direction of the noise, which was coming from a cemetery. Eight or nine women in mourning were crying, or more accurately wailing. They wailed in front of one tomb after another. Perhaps this was the day for the Tajiks to remember the dead.

We walked around the cemetery and found that all the tombs had small earthen mounds, some covered with lime. On top of every mound was a saddle-shaped frame, symbolizing a horse for the dead relatives to ride on. Some dilapidated tomb walls were painted with simple but abstract patterns of clothes, horses, hands and the sun, all in red. Like the Han Chinese, the Tajiks love red, however for them, blue is the colour of mourning.

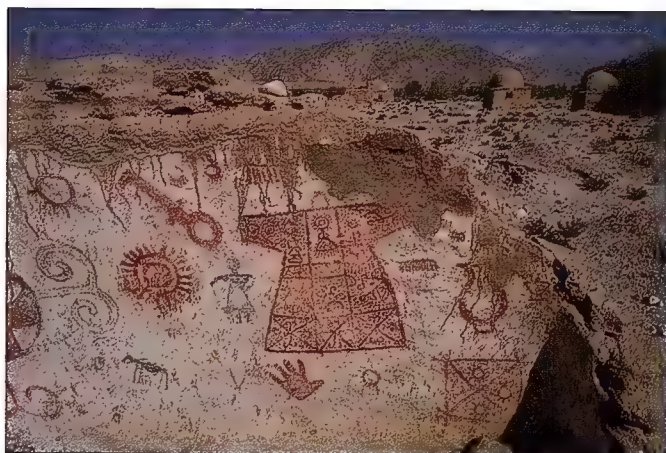
All night long, our car drove down the mountain. Temperatures began to rise and our cold-weather clothes were peeled off layer by layer. In just five hours, we went from autumn to midsummer. In Kashi, our destination, one shirt is enough.

Translated by Huang Youyi

On the shores of the Taxkorgan River an ancient post station with a domed roof still stands intact (1). To get from Taxkorgan to Kashi, one must cross the source of the Gez River (2). The Tajik people, once strictly nomads, now often farm the plains (3). Stone City in Taxkorgan is said to have a history of over 1,000 years (4). The tomb chambers of the Tajik people are decorated with murals (5). Compared to ancient post stations, this hostel looks like a four-star hotel (6).



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PART TWO



Kashi—The Largest Bazaar in Xinjiang

We shall now leave this country and tell you of the province of Kashgar, which lies towards the east-north-east.

Kashgar was once a kingdom, but now it is subject to the Great Khan. It has villages and towns in plenty. The biggest city, and the most splendid, is Kashgar. The inhabitants live by trade and industry. They have very fine orchards and vineyards and flourishing estates. Cotton grows here in plenty, besides flax and hemp. The soil is fruitful and productive of all the means of life. This country is the starting-point from which many merchants set out to market their wares all over the world.... The inhabitants have a language of their own....

— *The Travels of Marco Polo*

While crossing the Hindu Kush Mountains and the Pamir Highland in 1272, frightened and injured by avalanches, the 18-year-old Marco Polo was suffering from severe mountain sickness and fell seriously ill. A high fever, complicated by terrible dreams during which he talked continuously, took a great toll on his health.

Descending the plateau, he came to the oasis called Kashgar (today's Kashi), which immediately injected him with new life. Once he came down to a height of about 1,000 metres, the mountain sickness that had been torturing him naturally disappeared. Thanks to the warm temperatures, nourishing food and the hospitality of the Uygurs, he soon recovered.

Hundreds of years after Marco Polo's trip, Kashi remains a major city, with people from all over still coming to market their goods, and its residents just as devoted to commerce as they were then.

The small alleys in Kashi in many ways resemble those found in Turkish towns. Courtyards are planted with fruit trees and grape vines, and high-quality cotton is cultivated in the fields. In this sense, little has changed in the 700 years since Marco Polo passed through. Here, we had our own experience of what Marco Polo described as "a language of their own", a pure Uygur language which is very hard to understand without a translator.

Donkey carts are the most common means of transportation among the Uygurs in Xinjiang (1). An unusual mosque in Yengisar (2). The Uygur Muslims in Kashi have their own particular customs. For example, the veil shown in this picture is rarely seen in northern Xinjiang (3).





Single Uygur girls do not need to wear the veil, as it is required only for married women.





The day we arrived in Kashi, a Sunday, turned out to be bazaar day. We had been to many parts of Xinjiang and visited many bazaars, but the one in Kashi was by far the largest and most impressive. We were told that sometimes over 100,000 people congregate here.

The bazaar only reached its peak after 11:00 in the morning. Once in the bazaar, people lost their individuality: they were all part of a huge mass of human beings. One's ears echoed with a continual buzzing sound.

In a small lane of shops, jackets, skirts, towels and socks in all colours and styles hung on display, looking like national flags on ocean-going vessels. Uygur women wearing veils peddled square hats that they had embroidered. The most active salesmen were boys of seven or eight who squeezed their way through the crowd, shouting out their wares. From time to time, they would pull in customers, persuading them to buy their goods.

The food stands at the bazaar, however, were by far the most popular. On thousands of stoves, a great variety of delicacies were being prepared. The sound of the copper ladles beating against the pots, together with the shouts of the food pedlars, formed a strange symphony.

One of the most interesting activities was watching young men making hand-pulled noodles. The dough, which can weigh up to several kilogrammes, must first be rolled and kneaded to become the right texture. Then the cook firmly grips the dough by both ends and swings it up high in the air repeatedly until it is stretched into the shape of a long, thick noodle. He then doubles the dough, swings it, pounds it, rolls it and then repeats the process a dozen times until the dough is of even thickness. The finishing touch is the most entertaining part, when the cook twirls the dough in the air in a semi-circle and sends the noodles flying right into the boiling pot two metres away.

Other offerings at the bazaar included mutton, which is eaten with one's hands, *nang* or Xinjiang-style baked bread, and kebabs which sizzled appetizingly on the grill. We also happened to see a primitive type of ice-cream maker which was operated by hand. In the dry and hot August weather, ice-cream sales were brisk. We were fortunate to arrive at the most opportune time of the year: the fruit harvesting season, when apples, grapes, watermelon and Hami melon can be seen everywhere. Melons here were much, much sweeter than those grown in inland provinces, and every time we ate one, our fingers and lips would get sticky. Even our throats seemed to be sticky with sweetness.

Mini-Donkeys Also on Sale in Kashi

The bazaar in Kashi also had a livestock section, which was full of black and white sheep, brown-coloured oxen and gambolling horses and donkeys. For the Uygurs, donkeys are the ideal beast of burden, as they can both carry their owners and pull carts as well. Every Uygur family has its own donkeys. The local donkeys, extremely small compared with the long-legged and tall Guanzhong donkeys in Shaanxi, are flexible, beautiful and very charming. Whenever we saw robust men and grown-up women riding by on their mini donkeys, we felt concerned for the little creatures.

At the livestock market, there was a fascinating etiquette involving the buying and selling of animals. We saw a young Uygur man, a potential customer, grab a donkey, jump on its back and ride off, throwing up clouds of dust. After walking it for a while, the donkey was brought back, having been tested for strength and temperament. If in addition an examination of its teeth proved satisfactory, the deal was sealed. Prospective horse buyers would ride for an even longer distance to test the animal out.

On sale at the bazaar were also various types of foreign goods. Pakistani merchants were regular visitors, and some of them pre-

ferred bartering to buying and selling. Though the method was simple, it greatly facilitated the proceedings.

Kashi is not only a business and trading centre in south Xinjiang, but also the "capital city" for the Uygurs of the area. The largest and most authoritative mosque of the entire Xinjiang region is found here. Also in Kashi is the tomb of Lady Xiang, a concubine of Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736-1795) of the Qing Dynasty.

Uygurs: Experienced Businessmen

When it comes to business, Uygurs from Kashi are more experienced than other ethnic groups. They can be found in Beijing and Guangzhou, buying clothes, selling fur and leather goods, and even exchanging hard currency on the black market. In Kashi, as soon as a stranger appears in the street, several Uygurs will immediately approach trying to sound out the visitor in different languages, to determine whether he is from Japan or Hong Kong or somewhere else. The reason? To find out what kind of hard currency the person is using, if any. Even children of three and four shout at visitors: "Hello ... bye-bye..."

The ancestors of the Uygurs, called the Huihes, were already doing business in inland China during the Tang Dynasty. Later they settled along the Tianshan Mountains, right where the main section of the ancient Silk Road was located. Their special gift for doing business, and other factors such as location and their ability to make friends with other people made the Uygurs international business partners with both the East and West.

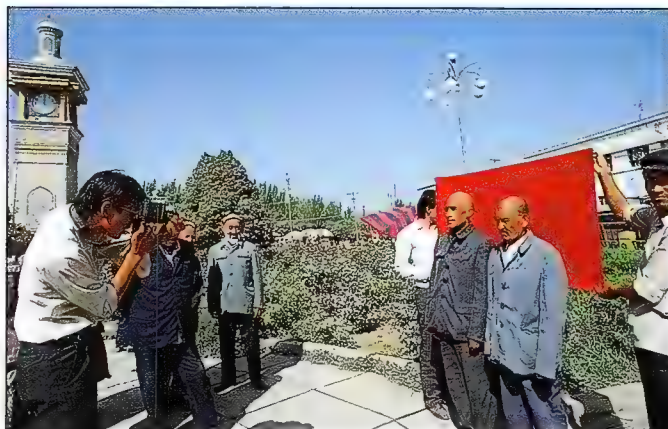
We left the bazaar and entered residential quarters, where small lanes were lined with houses. Every Uygur woman we came across had a veil, a custom similar to that in Iran. However, Uygur women in northern Xinjiang are not as conservative, and do not mind not wearing the veil, so unlike in Iran, men and women can meet and talk to each other without that cloth barrier. In recent years, Kashi women have even taken to rolling up their veil slightly to show part of their face.

Courtyard walls in Xinjiang are usually built with mud and painted white. Windows and doors tend to be light blue, just like in Turkish and Middle Eastern towns. Watered and nurtured by the highland snow water, the land here is crisscrossed with a network of canals, making it fertile and highly productive even though rainfall is rare. Every family grows flowers and grapes in their courtyard.

In the evening, we sat under a grape trellis in one of these courtyards, enjoying local beer and watermelon. Through the leaves, we saw the sparkling stars in the sky and our thoughts drifted afar. Marco Polo, together with his father and uncle, must have also drunk wine and eaten watermelon under grapevines when they were here. What fun it would be if only time could go back 700 years so that we could be together with those intrepid explorers, exchanging travel tales!

Translated by Huang Youyi

Seven hundred years after Marco Polo's arrival in Kashi, it is still a thriving commercial centre. People from all over the region come to buy, sell and barter at Kashi's huge weekly bazaar (1). When Uygur people come to the bazaar, many use the opportunity to take photos of themselves and each other. They come well prepared for the task, carrying a piece of cloth to hang as backdrop (2). Every street and lane in Kashi has its own atmosphere, reminiscent of Middle Eastern towns (3). In The Travels, Marco Polo observed that Kashi people have their own language. This merchant shouting out his wares, therefore, can only be understood by the local people (4).



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This waitress works in one of Kashi's small Muslim restaurants, where tourists are welcome to try the local delicacies (1). These men are making hand-pulled noodles (2). Sheep have been the companions of Uygur Muslims for generations (3). This man listens to tapes on a modern cassette player while eating a traditional Uygur meal (4).



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One glance at this furniture shop reveals the excellent craftsmanship of Uyghur furniture (1). Xinjiang is famous all over the world for its beautiful carpets (2). The strong smells coming from this kitchen in Kashi attract many hungry customers (3). In this small Uyghur restaurant, posters of film stars adorn the walls (4). There is a recreation area next to the bazaar for young people who don't want to go shopping with their parents (5). This craftsman is busy painting a table, oblivious of the noise around him (6). When bargaining with these ladies, don't be fooled by their veils — they can still see their customer's every move (7).

PART THREE



Hotan — An Oasis in the Desert

... We shall pass on to Khotan, which lies towards the east-north-east.

Khotan is a province eight days' journey in extent, which is subject to the Great Khan. The inhabitants all worship Mahomet. It has cities and towns in plenty, of which the most splendid, and the capital of the kingdom, bears the same name as the province, Khotan. It is amply stocked with the means of life. Cotton, flax, hemp, and corn grow here in plenty. It has vineyards, estates, and orchards in plenty. The people live by trade and industry; they are not at all war-like.

... The most splendid city and the capital of the province is called Pem. There are rivers here in which are found stones called jasper and chalcedony in plenty.

— The Travels of Marco Polo

In Marco Polo's time, the region of land stretching from Kashi to Hotan (Khotan) was in Turkestan, under the control of the Great Khan. People were mainly followers of Islam, as they are today. Then, however, there was also a sizeable community of Nestorian Christians, with their own churches and religious observances.

It took Marco Polo over a week to cover a distance that nowadays only requires a couple of days. Sitting inside our car as we crossed vast expanses of the Taklimakan Desert, we could not help imagining him as he slowly made his way by camel, for centuries the only means of transport for crossing the desert.

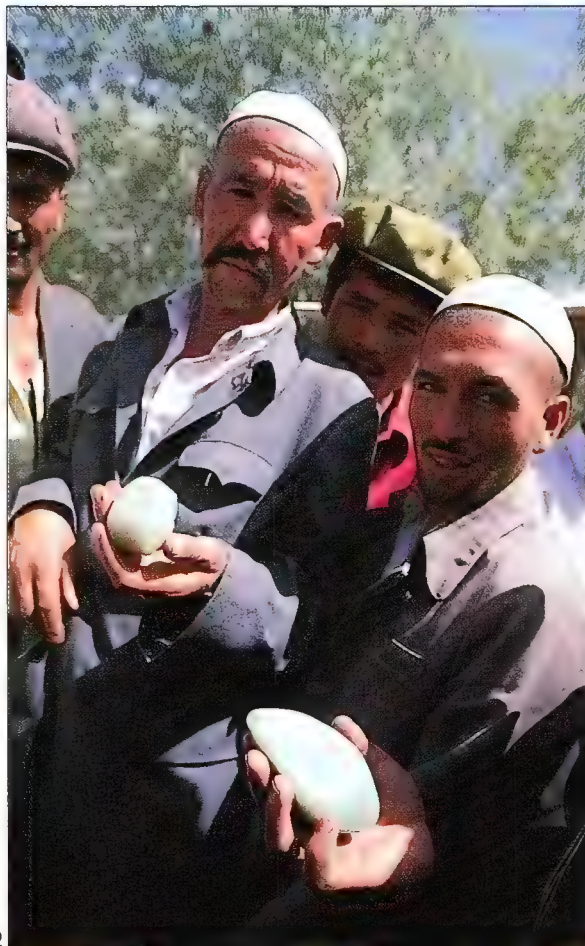
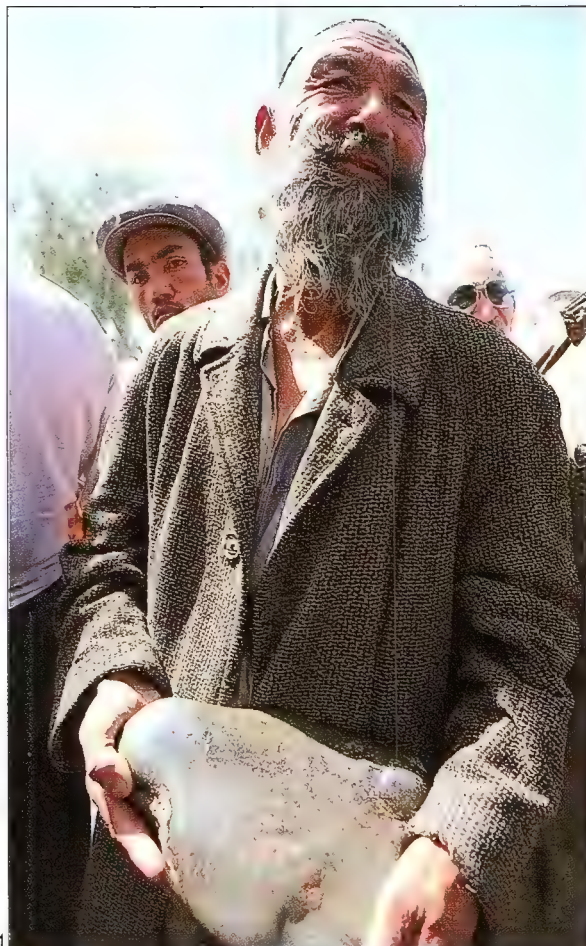
Hotan is still a town of affluence, just as Marco Polo described in his book. Arts and crafts are flourishing and a local kind of silk called Alice Silk is produced on a household basis. Jade is another famous product of the region, as many of the rivers in the area have natural jade in abundant quantities.



Like the women in Iran, Muslim ladies in Xinjiang also wear the veil (1). According to traditional marriage customs in Hotan, the bride sits neither in a sedan-chair nor on a horse, but on a red carpet (2).







Previous pages: Scenes from a Uygur wedding (1-10).

Having left Kashi, we crossed several rivers, passed Shule and arrived at Yengisar, which is known throughout China for its superb handmade knives of the same name. At a local market, we saw some plastic-handled knives in all colours, but these were mere imitations of the authentic knives, though some of them were exquisitely made. No tourist would come this far to buy a plastic-handled knife, therefore they must be for daily use by the local people. One of the other interesting sights here is the local mosque. The patterns decorating the gate and windows are complex and delicate, exhibiting a high degree of skill and workmanship.

After covering a long section of the desert, we came upon an oasis crisscrossed with rivers and ditches. As we drove along, we saw fields stretching off into the distance on both sides of the road. This was Shache (Yarkant), a large county in southern Xinjiang. The town has a population of 480,000, over half of which are Han Chinese. In Kashi, people all spoke the Uygur language, but here we needed no interpreter.

Wherever we went, we met Han Chinese who had moved here from inner China. Though far away from their native lands, they mixed in well with the local people and lived a happy life here. Some of them were engaged in farming, others in animal husbandry. Due to recent oil exploration taking place in the area, many Han Chinese have been drawn here to work, creating what is now quite a prosperous little town.

When Marco Polo passed through Shache, however, there were certainly very few Han Chinese, since it was part of Turkestan. He found little of interest here, and in his book *The Travels*, wrote that there was "nothing worth mentioning", and decided to pass on to

Khotan. We, therefore, chose to do the same, and headed on to Yecheng, the starting point of the road that links Xinjiang to Tibet.

Visiting a Bazaar in Hotan

From Yecheng to Hotan there was almost nothing but desert, with very few inhabitants. Wherever there were people, there was a small seasonal river nearby. As we approached Hotan, we saw more and more rivers, tributaries of the Karakax River and the Yurungkax River in the Kunlun Mountains. The tributaries pass Hotan and merge into the Hotan River in the Taklimakan Desert. The river runs further north and finally disappears in the desert's dry sands. The Hotan area is backed by the Kunlun Mountains in the south, and faces the Taklimakan Desert in the north. The area receives its water in the form of melted snow coming down from the mountains, therefore from east to west there is a string of oases of various sizes. The bigger ones have grown into cities or towns, while the smaller ones are little villages.

Today's Hotan is not too different from what Marco Polo witnessed. People still live "by trade and industry", but of course in these modern days, these two words have quite a different meaning than they did 700 years ago. Today, besides the traditional donkey carts, many farmers also own trucks, tractors, TV sets and other appliances.

Donkey carts have been in existence in this area for thousands of years and as we approached Hotan, we saw more and more of them. When we reached the area where Hotan's bazaar was being held, we found that the road was virtually packed with donkey carts. In fact, we were forced to get out of our car and walk the rest of the way among countless donkey carts and their drivers.

At the entrance to the bazaar was a high arch, and once inside we saw a number of stalls selling caps and carpets. Hotan being especially famed for the latter. Like the Tajik people, Uygurs love the colour red. Most of the carpets we saw had a red background but each had its own design and pattern. To carry the carpets, the vendors simply rolled them up and stuck them under their arms. When asked about the price, one vendor unfurled his carpet to show it to us while busily gesticulating and praising its quality. Then he rolled it up and put it under his arm again. Squatting down, he began to bargain, sometimes raising his voice, sometimes lowering it. The whole process was really quite amusing.

Panning for Jade in the Rivers of Hotan

Hotan jade is well-known throughout China for its excellent quality. In the bazaar there were special markets just for selling and buying jade. To attract customers, the jade vendors carried a few stones in their hands. Sometimes they tossed the stones up in the air, sometimes they made noise with them. Some clever ones pretended to be looking at their own jade in great admiration so as to attract more customers.

Hotan jade is in fact easy to get in this area. In summer when the snow in the Kunlun Mountains melts, torrents of water rush down the mountain slopes, bringing jade of all sizes to the valleys of Hotan. Having rolled a long distance, they have been chafed smooth and round, and look both pure and beautiful.

Early in the morning, we strolled to a riverbed and saw many jade prospectors already there. One old man was carrying a large piece of black jade and trotting towards the riverside, his face all smiles. Another young man held many small green transparent stones in his hands, which he carefully placed on a piece of white cloth by the sandy riverside. He tried to sell them right away, and there was no shortage of buyers. Not wanting to trouble themselves to pan for jade personally, potential buyers just stood aside and watched, and when something good was found, they would snap it up at a good price. Then they would take it to the market to resell it at a much higher price.

Alice Silk – A Local Specialty

Another famous local product in this area is a special kind of silk called Alice Silk. Our next stop, therefore, was to visit a Uygur family which specialized in the weaving of Alice Silk. As soon as we entered the house, we were enveloped by the steam rising from a row of cauldrons. Men and women both were hard at work spinning silk by hand, perhaps the most primitive method found in China today. One young girl was spinning the silk on a wooden wheel, while in another room, girls made the silk into thread. Two men then put the thread onto a loom for weaving – a very time-consuming process seldom used these days.

The owner, whose ancestors had also been makers of Alice Silk, said, "Hotan's Alice Silk is produced on a household basis. Spinning, threading, drawing patterns, dyeing, weaving and so on, it is all done by hand. It takes ten days to complete the making of one bolt of silk fabric. In every household, young and old work together, and in one year, a family like this could produce more than a hundred bolts of silk. My father and grandfather were both in this line, and they passed it down to us."

When he began working at home, he decided to employ piece-work labourers. In this way two girls could finish a whole day's work in five hours. A bolt of silk fabric could now be woven within two days by two weavers. With the price for one bolt at nine yuan, this was an enormous increase in efficiency over the old methods. In addition, he found that the hired workers worked harder than family members. The women in the family were now responsible just for the making of silk skirts.

Nowadays, however, it was not as easy as it used to be to market them, as young people tend to prefer clothes made of synthetic materials. Machine-made clothes have better patterns and are cheaper, according to them. With these changes in traditional attitudes so prevalent, it is getting harder and harder to sell silk clothes of any kind in this part of the world.

Attending a Uygur Wedding

One Saturday our host told us that there was going to be a wedding for two of the local young people. Sure enough, we soon heard the sound of drums and *suona* trumpets. We said goodbye to our host and hurried out. Following the sound, we found the house where the wedding was being held. Two hand drums and one *suona* trumpet were being played and the whole courtyard was full of activity.

Over a large stove, there were two pots full of food. One was *pilau* rice, which people ate with their hands, the other was cooked meat and vegetables. Every household we visited served their food

This giant piece of jade was taken out of a river in Hotan (1). People who attend the bazaar must be good at both assessing and bargaining (2). Hotan carpets are famous within China and abroad. Surprisingly, Marco Polo did not mention anything in his book about carpets, perhaps because he only stayed a short time in Hotan, or perhaps because the industry had not yet taken off at that time (3). In Hotan, every farming family uses part of the house for weaving. Carpet-making is the responsibility of the women in the family (4).



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this way. Like the Han Chinese, the Uyghur people throw big parties on the day of a wedding. During the banquet, the groom must play the role of the host and look after his friends and relatives.

At about noon, guests began arriving one by one. Men and women sat on the ground, with men on one side and women on the other. We were first served fried noodles, then rice. On top of the rice, there was a layer of mutton. Both the host and the guests used one hand to hold a plate, while the other shovelled the rice into his or her mouth. We thought it rather strange to have a wedding with no wine, as here tea was the only drink. Later we found out that they are not allowed to drink alcohol according to Islamic law.

The tea Uyghur people drink has a strange taste, a bit like an herbal broth. We did not like it at first, but wherever we went in southern Xinjiang, we were always entertained with the same tea. Gradually we not only got used to it but even came to love it, eventually thinking that all tea should taste like this. Later we were told that the tea is made of more than ten medicinal herbs and is said to benefit the stomach and intestines. No wonder the four of us had no trouble with our stomachs no matter what we ate or drank. In fact, the Uyghur people are very careful about their food, and do not eat anything of a cold nature (antipyretic). For example, they believe that muskmelon has something of a hot nature, and watermelon has a cold nature, so they prefer muskmelons.

At around 6:00 in the evening after the wedding party was over, most of the guests began to leave. Close friends and relatives got on donkey carts and formed a procession of ten to twenty carts to go to the bride's house. As soon as they entered her house, they

divided themselves into two groups according to sex. Then they started the wedding feast all over again: mutton, rice and medicinal tea. Having eaten and drunk their fill, the women displayed the dowry and clothes given to the bride. The men, standing around an imam (religious leader), listened to him recite prayers. Then they examined the marriage certificate.

After consulting the bridegroom, four strong young men were chosen to carry the bride out on a carpet. The bride, wearing a new dress and a veil over her head and face, was carried out of the courtyard and put onto a cart. On the way, they were stopped by latecomers, so everyone got out of their carts and began to dance, only later continuing on their way. On that day, several couples got married so all the roads were packed with people and carts. Once the wedding party reached the bride's house, there were more rituals, like "lifting the bride's veil", "joking with the newlyweds" and so on, until midnight.

Nowadays, Uyghur brides seldom wear traditional clothes, instead choosing white gauze wedding gowns. Some wear make-up, but they seem unsure of how much to use, sometimes to comical effect. These are signs that the outside world is finally reaching these extremely remote places, albeit slowly and bit by bit. We felt reluctant to leave Hotan. The local customs and the people's colourful lives left a strong impression on us.

Walnuts in Qira and a Sandstorm in Yutian

Having left Hotan, we drove east and arrived in Qira. Qira's existence relies on a river, also called Qira. Covering the riverbed were trellises laden with grapes, while walnut trees grew by the riv-





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erside. When we arrived it was walnut season, and people were bringing down the nuts using long poles. Children frolicked about in the water, picking up fallen walnuts and putting them in their baskets.

It was noon when we reached Yutian, and upon our arrival we were promptly greeted by a sandstorm! We had to take shelter indoors, but as soon as we thought the worst was over, it began to pour. The rain caused a yellow dust to cover the earth, but it also made the sky brighter.

Taking advantage of the clearing skies, we set off for a village outside the town to see how the little Uyghur caps were made. The caps worn by Uyghur women were particularly interesting, all black except for the top, which was done in many colours. Looking somewhat like an upside-down tea cup, these caps were different from those we had seen elsewhere.

In Yutian, there is a mosque built in a unique architectural style. Before long, we heard the sound of a man's voice, strong and baritone. We were told that this was the imam, who stood on top of the local mosque to call people to Sunday morning prayer.

When we got out onto the street, we saw people coming out of their houses while tidying up their clothes and caps. A child was being pulled along, one hand holding onto his mother's dress, while the other rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Before long, there was a big crowd in front of the mosque. Men filed into the mosque while the women stood outside, since according to Islamic law they are not allowed inside the mosque to pray. By the end of the service, the sun was well up in the sky, cascading golden sunshine over the top of the mosque, creating a beautiful sight.



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The traditional method of manufacturing Alice Silk is quite a time-consuming process. First the cocoons are placed in boiling water to loosen the gum, then the silk is reeled out and put onto a spinning wheel (1). The boss distributes wages to the workers according to the weight of the thread they produced that day (2). After dyeing, the thread is spun and is then ready for weaving (3). The head of the family always personally inspects the quality of the work (4). This woman is hard at work while also taking care of her baby (5). It is not unusual to see men working in silk production (6). Since it is so dry here, the weavers spit while working to keep the air moist, as dry air causes the silk to break easily (7). These two newly-woven pieces of Alice Silk are quickly bought by a customer who travelled a long distance for this special product (8).



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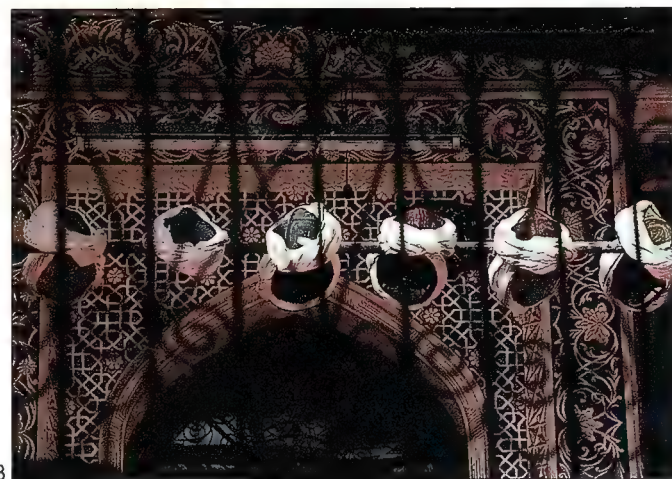
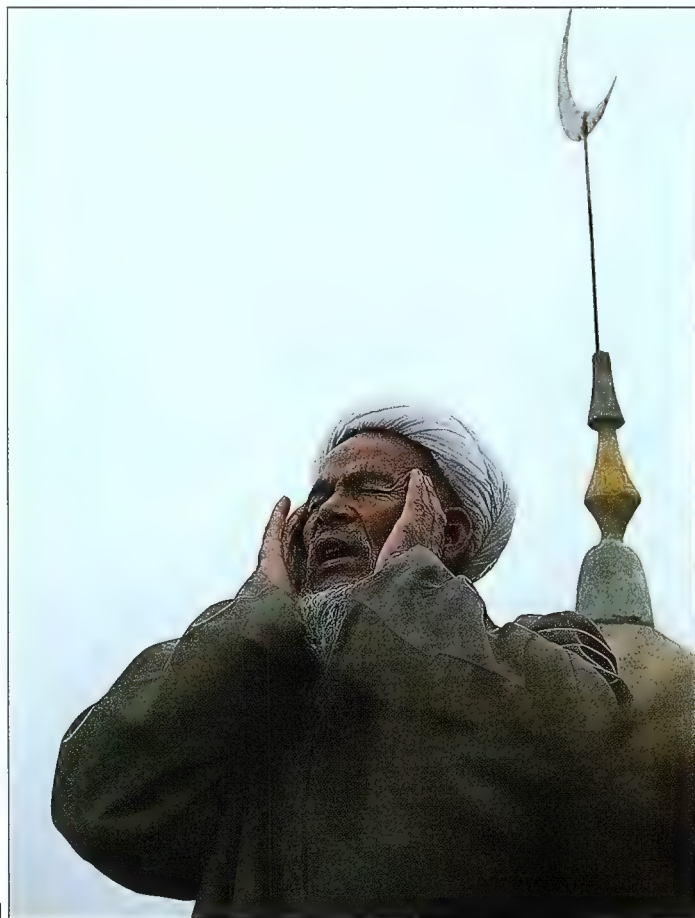
Braving Gusts of Hot Wind to Minfeng

From Yutian to Minfeng the only route is via a long road through the Taklimakan Desert. It was scorching hot in mid-August, and by 10:00 in the morning, the burning sun was already beating down on the desert. Wave upon wave of heat seemed to be rising, forming strong gusts of hot wind which swept across the desert. It whipped up the sand and sent it flying in mid-air. We shut the car windows tight, but then the temperature soon rose to nearly 40°. Everyone was soaked with sweat. It was hard to imagine that only a few days ago, we had shivered with cold in our down-filled jackets beside Karakuli Lake on the Pamir Highland.

As the car raced eastwards, the sun came slanting through the windows, making everything extremely hot to the touch. All we could do was sit still, close our eyes and let the beads of sweat course down our cheeks, feeling like we were in a Finnish bath or Turkish sauna. Maybe it was even good for our health. After a few days like this, someone suggested, we would surely lose a few pounds. Wasn't that a good thing? Trying to keep the positive side in mind, we decided to forget about the suffocating heat and think of our next destination – Minfeng.

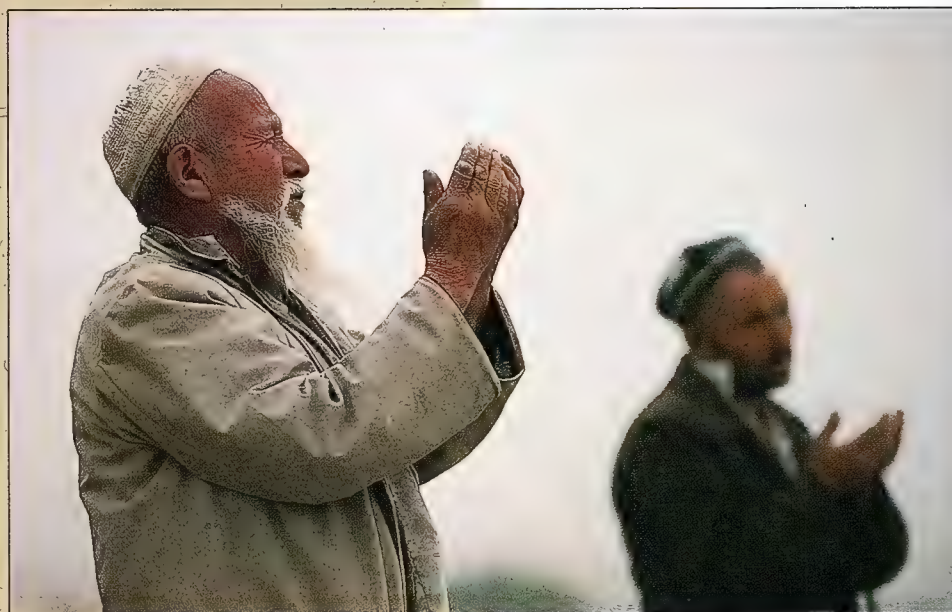
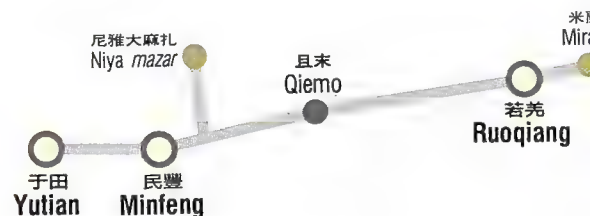
Translated by Wang Mingjie

The Uygurs living around Yutian are all Muslims, and go to the mosque every Friday to pray (5). Early in the morning, the imam at the mosque in Yutian stands on the roof to call people to morning prayer (1). In order to become an imam, one must undergo professional training and examinations (2). The turbans worn by imams are quite unusual. When they are not being worn for Friday prayer services, the imams hang them on a pole outdoors (3). Those who cannot enter the mosque because it is already full simply pray outside (4).





PART FOUR



Crossing the Taklimakan Desert

All this province (Charchan) is a tract of sand; and so is the country from Khotan to Pem and from Pem to here. There are many springs of bad and bitter water, though in some places the water is good and sweet. When it happens that an army passes through the country, if it is a hostile one, the people take flight with their wives and children and their beasts two or three days' journey into the sandy wastes to places where they know that there is water and they can live with their beasts....

— *The Travels of Marco Polo*

Pem and Charchan mentioned by Marco Polo were the names of two ancient areas that flourished in his time. The ruins of the city of Pem lie in a place called Laodamagou in the Taklimakan, and Charchan Province was probably the region between Yutian and Ruqiang.

This section of our journey would take us from Yutian to Minfeng, not a great distance on the map, but it turned out to be one of the most arduous parts of our trip. Travelling across vast expanses of the Taklimakan Desert by jeep, we began to understand why camels are still the most reliable means of transport.

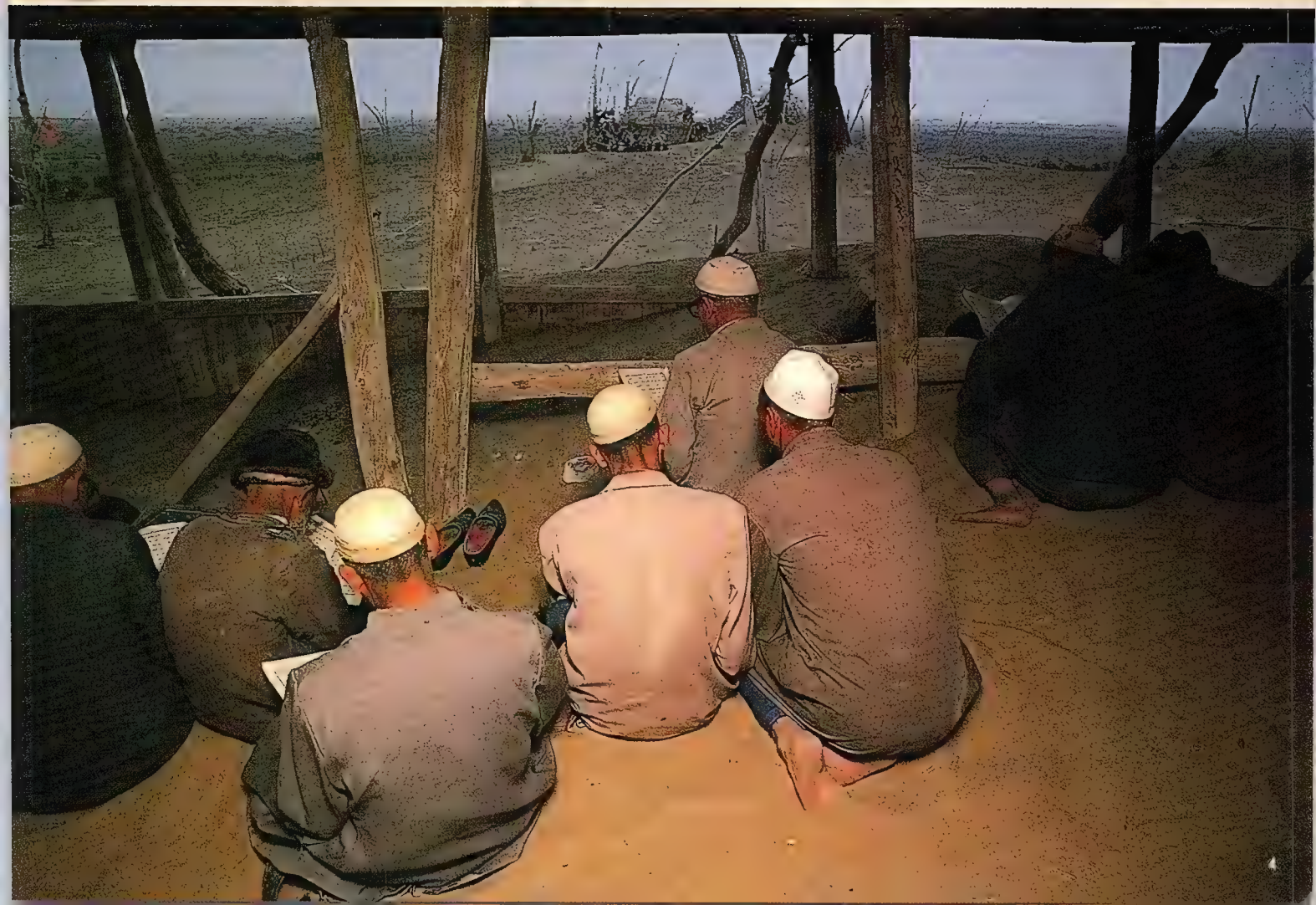
Like Marco Polo, we also found precious little in the way of spring water, needing to carry all potable water with us wherever we went. Thankfully, hostile armies no longer marauded their way through the desert – for us the greatest enemies were mosquitoes and the endless, all-consuming sand.

The imams in Minfeng pray to Allah (1) while Muslim women wait quietly in the dark for the mazar to begin in the morning (2).





This framework is the entrance to the Niya mazar (1). This lone pilgrim prays in the direction of the mazar (2). Facing the mazar, these men recite the great deeds of their prophet (3). Under the morning sunshine, Islamic faithful recite the Koran (4).





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Having left Yutian, we arrived in Minfeng County Town at noon. The town has only one street, one department store, one post office and one government office. Yet this is the political, economic and cultural centre for the entire county. Along the street there were several dozen stalls selling roast mutton. Driven by hunger, hot weather and fatigue, we scrabbled out of the bus and sat down on two benches to eat kebabs and drink beer.

The air was filled with smoke, dust and the smell of roast mutton. We soon began to count the skewers lying in front of us. Each of us had finished at least 80 kebabs and together we drunk ten bottles of beer. Looking back at the vehicles on the road, we saw that all the tractors and mule carts were filled with Uyghur people, men and women, old and young, hastening eastwards. Upon inquiry, we learned that everyone was making a pilgrimage to the *Niya mazar* (a holy cemetery) near the small village of Tülkiqikol.

Unlike going to the bazaar, going on a pilgrimage to the *mazar* is a sacred, solemn activity for devout Muslims. Muslims in the rest of the world make pilgrimages to Mecca, but Xinjiang Muslims go on pilgrimage to the *mazar* in Minfeng, where it is said that a legendary Islamic prophet is buried. Each August, the Uyghurs in southern Xinjiang, and even followers of Islam in northern Xinjiang, drive their ox carts, mule carts and tractors through deserts and over snow-covered mountains to Minfeng, experiencing many hardships along the way. At the *mazar* they pay homage to obtain enlightenment from the prophet, an occasion as grand as its counterpart in Mecca.

Though we did not want to miss this rare opportunity, our car could not run the risk of driving into the desert. However, our host enthusiastically helped us to find a refitted jeep which could seat eight people. This special vehicle belonged to the vice president of the Islamic Association of Minfeng County, a renowned imam in the district. The elderly vice president, who was already seated in the jeep, insisted he should accompany us on the pilgrimage to the *mazar*. The driver was also a Muslim, and sitting beside him was his assistant – a very young boy. They had brought shovels and planks of wood in case of emergency.

A Difficult Pilgrimage

We finally started out on our journey into the unknown. As first-time visitors, we were excited because very few outsiders had ever dared to tackle the dangerous road leading into the depths of the Taklimakan Desert. We drove along the banks of the Niya River towards the vast desert, first on a sand road, then on a dirt track and eventually just through the sand. Our jeep went slower and slower the further we penetrated the desert, finally sinking into a pit of sand. We jumped out and pushed, and with great effort succeeded in getting the jeep out of one pit, but into another. Our only recourse was to get out and push again.

The Uyghurs' tractors were ten times better than our little jeep for travelling in the desert. With large trailers carrying people of all ages plus several calves and bleating lambs, they chugged along ahead of us, leaving behind a trail of black smoke.

For us, however, it was much harder going. After sinking a few times in the sand, the jeep broke down. As the driver and his young assistant began to repair it, we got out to stretch our legs. But suddenly, as soon as we stepped onto the ground, our feet sank ankle-deep into the sand. Just as we pulled one foot out of the sand, the other one would sink in. We walked slowly, the sand absorbing all our strength and energy. Our legs felt as weak as if we had just recovered from a serious illness.

No wonder our jeep had broken down. As we stopped to take a breath and look back, we saw the imam from Minfeng County kneeling on a sand dune, praying towards the west. Perhaps he was praying for help from Prophet Mohammed far away in Mecca. We hoped he would obtain a response.

We had not noticed any mosquitoes as we walked along, but when we stopped, large mosquitoes coming from the diversiform-leaved poplar trees on the banks of the Niya River attacked us from all sides. We waved our hands around to protect our heads, but it was all in vain. Finally we could bear it no longer and returned to our vehicle.

It was going to be impossible for us to drive on the sand, but the ground beneath the trees appeared solid enough. Perhaps we could find a new route there. We began to explore, while the driver's assistant ran back and forth in search of branches to put under the wheels and cleared away the loose sand. He was an intelligent lad full of drive. Small and frail though he was, he never stopped working. After a while, the jeep came to life again, and with great sighs of relief, we resumed our journey.

A Night-Time Journey into the Desert

Before we knew it, night was upon us. We had started out at 5:00 p.m. and it was now nearly 10:00; we had spent more than four hours on the sand "road". When we calculated the distance, we found that we had only covered 50 kilometres! To reach the Niya *mazar*, we had more than 40 kilometres to go, but when we learned that the road ahead was easier, we began to relax.

The temperature dropped quickly after the sun had set and the unbearable heat of the day passed. Our drinking water was nearly gone so we would have to drink sparingly to make it last until we arrived at our destination. We bumped violently along the rough sand road, which was illuminated only by the jeep's dazzling headlights. The dust was so suffocating we could scarcely breathe. Luckily we had brought wet towels with us when we left, which now came in very useful as a cover for our mouths. Breathing was difficult, but at least it prevented the disgusting dust from getting into our mouths.

We reached a village called Kabakasgan at midnight. From the village to the Niya *mazar* it was only five kilometres. With over 400 households, the village was the largest residential area in the desert. The Niya River, which comes down from the Kunlun Mountains, has created an oasis of life where villagers herd cattle and sheep and grow corn. Weary though we were, we resisted the temptations of comfortable lodgings and delicious food and continued on our way, determined to stay near the *mazar* so as to catch the religious service that would take place there the next morning.

After another half hour of difficult driving, at 1:00 a.m. we reached Tülkiköl, a small village of just 15 households which serves as a lodging place for pilgrims. In the light of our jeep's headlights, we saw pilgrims from all parts of Xinjiang sleeping on the ground in the open spaces between the cottages. The chugging of our jeep's engine and its headlights awakened not only the sound sleepers who had travelled all day through the desert, but also the imams living in the village. They all came out to welcome us and wish us a pleasant journey.

We felt elated; after having travelled for more than eight grueling hours, we had finally arrived at Xinjiang's Mecca. Our hosts quickly treated us to tea, *nang* cakes and soft, sweet melons. No midnight snack in the world could have been better than this one. As we enjoyed our food and drank the tea, we listened to the imam as he related to us the history of the Niya *mazar*.

A Bedtime Story

In fluent Mandarin, the imam told us that an Islamic prophet, a fifth generation descendant of Mohammed, was buried in the Niya *mazar*. In the middle of the Tang Dynasty, he led his troops on an eastern expedition during an Islamic Jihad (holy war). His army went straight into China, took Kashi and then reached Hotan, where he met a strong opponent, the Tufan Regime, a hege-

monious power in the Western Regions. During the fierce battle that ensued, he was defeated and killed on a sand dune. His body was buried on the spot – the present-day Niya *mazar*.

In the depths of the desert, about ten kilometres north of the village, are the ruins of the original town of Niya, which many modern scholars believe was the capital of the Jingjue Kingdom as recorded in the *History of the Han Dynasty*. The site of the ruins stretches 22 kilometres from south to north and six kilometres from east to west. Among the ruins are the remains of temples, living quarters, gardens and bridges.

Since Muslim women are not allowed to enter the mosque, they form groups outside to pray (1). The coffin under this large carpet contains the body of Mohammed's fifth descendant (2). An imam tells us the story of this man, who died during an Islamic Jihad about 800 years ago (3). The goat on the roof does not know that it is almost time for its sacrifice (4). Before prayers, everyone must wash their feet and faces (5). After the sacrifice the goats are hung up as an offering (6).





The imam continued talking, but it was difficult to concentrate as it was so hot in the room. A Uyghur woman came into the middle of the room and set into motion the large canvas fan that was suspended from a beam in the ceiling, providing a much-needed cool breeze.

At 3:00 a.m. our host made sleeping arrangements for us, but it was so hot inside that we decided to take blankets and go sleep outside on a sand dune. The driver's young assistant followed us. We asked him where he would sleep and he said, "In the jeep of course," his voice filled with pride. He was only 14, but nonetheless he had played a greater role on our journey than any of us grown-ups.

In the depths of the night, the unbearable heat of the day gradually retreated, and a gentle breeze began to blow. Somehow we felt more comfortable lying on the sand in the middle of the Taklimakan Desert, with a few mud houses and tall trees nearby. Everywhere on the uneven sand, beside the tractors and under the eaves, the Islamic faithful slept, looking like an army camp in ancient times.

We could not help thinking of Marco Polo when he was here 700 years ago. It was in this area that he and his company met the welcoming cavalymen sent by the Great Khan. On their way to the capital Shang-tu, they must have camped in the Taklimakan Desert in the same way as we were doing tonight. Perhaps they did not have so many people with them, nor would they have had our modern vehicles. Instead, they had camels and horses, plus the bright moon and stars to accompany them. It must have been a wonderful sight!

Morning Prayer in the Desert

At 7:30 a.m. (Beijing time, but only 5:30 in Xinjiang), the day had not yet broken, but the pilgrims sleeping all around the village had already got up and were beginning to walk to the mosque. We got up as well, and followed them with our flashlights.

At 9:00 when the sun had completely risen, people flocked out of the mosque towards the vast desert. They walked in separate groups divided into men and women. We followed them through a small *mazar* and arrived at a high sand hill. From the top of the hill we saw an earthen house in the distance, around which were

flagpoles with small banners hung on them. This was the big *mazar*.

As they approached it, the Muslims began to go down on their knees to pray, repeating the process every few steps. On the hill behind the *mazar* was a large shed, where crowds of people knelt on the ground reading the Koran. Outside the *mazar* were also crowds of people kneeling on the ground reciting scriptures, while waiting for their turn to enter to do worship. No one spoke, and all wore a serious, solemn look on their faces.

In the distant forest below the *mazar*, a large group of women knelt on the ground around a bonfire, weeping bitterly. Beside them were crowds of men who had abandoned their usual behaviour and were also weeping in loud and booming voices. Wondering if someone had died recently, we asked someone and were told that they were pouring out the grievances and suffering concealed in their hearts to their prophet, in the hope of obtaining consolation and enlightenment to relieve them from their pain.

Around the *mazar* were poles with colourful banners, and around the entrance dry sheepskins were hung and stuffed with straw, offerings presented by worshippers. With great respect, the pilgrims took off their shoes and entered quietly. The imam pointed out to us a coffin lying on an earthen platform covered by cloth. Inside the coffin was the body of Mohammed's fifth descendant, who had spread the word of Islam to this area.

The Uyghur Muslims in southern Xinjiang deem it the greatest honour of their lifetime to go on a pilgrimage to the real Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Our imam told us about his one trip to Mecca: he had started from Kashi and then gone through Kunjirap to Pakistan, where he had boarded a plane and flown to Mecca. The trip had cost him 12,000 yuan. Anyone who wanted to make such a trip has to obtain prior approval from the government, but few people can afford it.

Xinjiang's Own Mecca

Fortunately, making pilgrimages to the *mazar* in Minfeng County did not cost that much. In fact, seven trips to Minfeng was equivalent to one trip to Mecca. It was not too difficult for ordinary people to visit the Niya *mazar* seven separate times in their lifetime. This was why the Uyghurs in Kuqa, Shache, Hotan and even in



1

Kashi and Korla would travel on buses, tractors and mule carts for several days and nights to pay homage.

It is said that there are a number of *mazars* in the Hotan region, each visited in different seasons. Buried in all these *mazar* are Muslim heroes, but the most famous and prestigious of all is the Niya *mazar*, with the annual pilgrimage held in August and September. Before or after this time no pilgrims come here – and once we arrived, we understood the reason. In spring, strong sand storms arise which continue for more than ten days at a time. You are not even able to stand up, let alone walk. In autumn and winter it is too cold, accommodations too few, and camping in the open is absolutely impossible. August and September, therefore, are the best times to make pilgrimages.

When we descended the sand dune at the *mazar*, the imam was waiting for us, and led us to an earthen house with a large bronze cauldron inside. He told us that the cauldron had a history of over a hundred years. Beside it was an Islamic-style floor lamp which was said to have been left behind on an ancient battlefield 1,200 years ago. We rather doubted the lamp's age: Islam was founded in the early 7th century, introduced to Kashi in the 11th century and to the Hotan and Minfeng area in the 12th century. At that time the area was inhabited by the Huihe people, who were Buddhists. It was after the Islamic Jihad that the Uygurs changed their faith, which was only 800 years ago.

On our way back, we again had to get out of the jeep from time to time to push it or rest. After seven or eight hours of bumping along in the desert, we finally returned to the highway. But suddenly the jeep's engine failed — we had run out of petrol! We all burst out laughing. Allah had blessed us, as we had not been detained in the desert. We stopped a passing truck, asked for some petrol and then continued on our way. At 10:00 p.m., we finally arrived back in Minfeng.

Along the way, the driver's young assistant enjoyed himself thoroughly. He would occasionally doze off holding a lamb in his arms, or when he was awake, laugh and chat happily. Upon our departure from Minfeng, we gave him a beautiful little Tibetan knife as a souvenir. He gladly accepted it, holding it tightly in his hands, not knowing what to say.

Translated by Xiong Zhenru



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3

This is the Niya mazar, considered by Uygur Muslims to be the Mecca of Xinjiang (1). The local inhabitants welcome pilgrims coming from afar (2). A "holy meal" is eaten after the mazar has concluded (3).

PART FIVE



Buried Cities and Shifting Sands — Onward to Dunhuang

... At the point where the traveller enters the Great Desert, is a big city called Lop.... I can tell you that travellers who intend to cross the desert rest in this town for a week to refresh themselves and their beasts. At the end of the week they stock up with a month's provisions for themselves and their beasts. Then they leave the town and enter the desert.

This desert is reported to be so long that it would take a year to go from end to end; and at the narrowest point it takes a month to cross it. It consists entirely of mountains and sand and valleys....

When a man is riding by night through this desert and something happens to make him loiter and lose touch with his companions, by dropping asleep or for some other reason, and afterwards he wants to rejoin them, then he hears spirits talking in such a way that they seem to be his companions. Sometimes, indeed, they even hail him by name. Often these voices make him stray from the path, so that he never finds it again. And in this way many travellers have been lost and have perished....

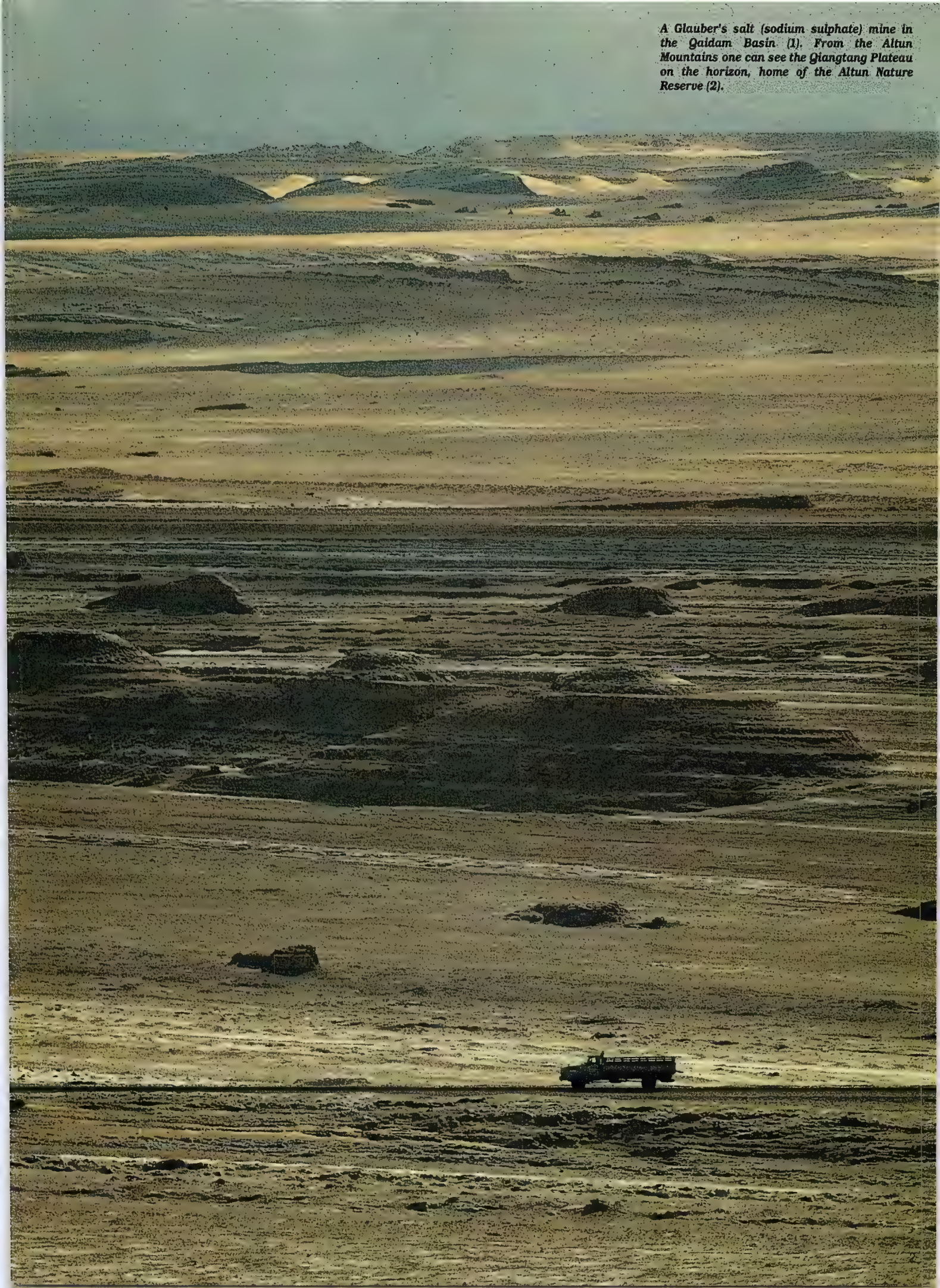
— The Travels of Marco Polo

The next leg of our journey is a long one, from Minfeng all the way across the desert to Dunhuang. Unfortunately, we were only able to follow in Marco Polo's footsteps as far as Ruoqiang, near to the ancient city of Lop (also known as Loulan, near Lop Nur), which is now buried deep beneath the sand.

Seven centuries ago, Marco Polo and many other travellers stopped over in Lop to stock up on supplies for the long and perilous journey through to desert to Hami. Although it did not take him a year to get through the desert, he did spend at least a month reaching Hami before continuing on to Dunhuang.

Nowadays it might not take that long, but in any case no one ventures any more into that vast, inhospitable desert wasteland. The desert has encroached upon and engulfed more and more territory as time has gone by, making it virtually a no man's land. Both today and in Marco Polo's time, as he wrote, "one must go for a day and a night without finding water" and "there is nothing to eat at all". This, combined with his eerie tales of voices and apparitions, made us very happy indeed that there is now a state road that leads to Dunhuang, where we would be back in "civilization".

A Glauber's salt (sodium sulphate) mine in the Qaidam Basin (1). From the Altun Mountains one can see the Qiangtang Plateau on the horizon, home of the Altun Nature Reserve (2).





Although totally barren, the Altun Mountains have abundant quantities of oil (1). According to the Chinese classic tale Journey to the West, Tripitaka crossed this river on his way to India in search of Buddhist scriptures (2). These mounds of rubble are all that remains of the ancient city of Miran (3). At first glance, the sodium sulphate deposits in this region look like frost in winter, until one remembers that they are in a desert (4).





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From Minfeng we continued our way eastward for 300 kilometres and arrived in Qiemo. Along the way the scenery was unexpectedly beautiful. Tall diversiform-leaved poplars and low reed clumps lined the road. Beyond, the land was covered with lush green grass on which cattle and sheep grazed leisurely. The Kunlun Mountains receded into the background until they finally disappeared.

We stopped only for a short rest at Qiemo, and then resumed our journey. We had to drive another 371 kilometres before we reached Ruqiang. Once out of Qiemo, the greenery was quickly replaced by yellow sand which stretched far into the distance. One long section of road ahead was completely covered by sand. Surrounding it were endless stretches of shifting sand dunes, moved about by the wind all year round. We were told that this was the place where the famous Tang Dynasty monk Xuan Zang (Tripitaka) crossed the Liusha River on his way to India, described in the novel *Journey to the West*.

We got out of the car to take photos, but when we tried to get back in, our feet quickly sank into the sand. It was difficult to take just one step forward; physical strength was useless here. Though road maintenance workers tried hard to hold down the sand with straw, the road was still engulfed by the yellow sand. At its maximum speed our car lumbered slowly along. Under the scorching sun we were sweating profusely, and felt anxious and uneasy. It was an arduous journey, however the exact same distance took Marco Polo five whole days, according to *The Travels*.

When we arrived at Ruqiang it was already midnight. After travelling 680 kilometres in one day we were totally exhausted and went to bed as soon as we checked into a guest house. When we woke up it was already past 10:00 in the morning. It was a sunny day, and outside the summer heat was suffocating.

Ruqiang is a small county seat with one street – not very long, but neat and tidy. Few passers-by could be seen in the town, perhaps due to the heat. We decided that we needed another day of relaxation after our long journey, so we spent the day strolling

around. In the evening we went to a neighbouring town to interview an old man who played the *dongbula*, a plucked string instrument used by the Uygur nationality. This lively 71-year-old musician had a long, silvery beard and captivated his audience with the beautiful music.

The Ruins of the Ancient City of Miran

At daybreak the following day we continued on our journey. After driving eastward for 70 kilometres we came to Miran, the oldest land reclamation area in Xinjiang. Around 2,000 years ago during the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 24), it was an army reclamation area called Yixun, belonging to the domain of the State of Loulan, one of the 36 states in the Western Regions. The ancient city of Loulan, or Lop, lies buried deep in the desert.

Today Miran is the place where Regiment No. 36 of the Xinjiang Reclamation Construction Corps is stationed. The ruins of the city of Miran, which include the remains of an ancient fortress, are located five kilometres east of Regiment No. 36. After more than 2,000 years, a 10-metre-high beacon tower, part of the fortresses, still stands erect.

From the fortress we could see a temple which was surrounded by groups of tombs. Standing out among them was a cone-shaped mausoleum, around which were the remains of civilian residences. This was a strong reminder that this was once a densely-populated, prosperous city, with fields and irrigation channels. In the past, all travellers from Ruqiang to Lop had to come through Miran. After this, the next city one comes to is Dunhuang, at the westernmost end of the Hexi Corridor.

During his visit to China 700 years ago, Marco Polo travelled this same route. He stayed for a period at the city of Lop for a rest and to prepare provisions for his forthcoming desert journey. He wrote in his book that a stock of provisions should be laid in for a month before crossing the desert. At that time this desert was considered to be the abode of many evil spirits, which distracted travellers to their destruction with most extraordinary illusions. For hundreds of

years, an unknown number of soldiers, merchants, monks, travelers and exiles met their death on this perilous road.

From the ruins of Miran we returned to Regiment No. 36, but along the way stopped at a village to interview a 104-year-old man called Kurban Kurruk. Having already been interviewed and photographed many times, the old man has been well-trained as a "photo actor". Without any instructions he posed for the camera, offering a variety of positions to choose from.

The reason he is so popular is that he is a Lop man, believed to be a descendant of the ancient Loulan people. Their ancestors all lived at Lop Nur and were engaged in fishing and hunting. They differ from the Uygur people in both language and appearance, looking more like Mongolians. When Lop Nur dried up several decades ago, they were forced to move and settle down in Miran.

Now that even Lop people have withdrawn from their native land, how could we dare to venture into this inhospitable region? Although Marco Polo did cross the desert from here to Sa-chau (present-day Dunhuang), it took him 30 days, and since then the conditions in the desert have only got worse. These days few people would even think of making such a dangerous journey.

Our only resort was to make a detour by turning southeastward through Qinghai Province to Dunhuang in Gansu.

A World of Asbestos

Returning back to Ruqiang from Miran, we headed eastward and before long the Altun Mountains came into view. Greyish yellow rocks covered the mountains and gravel danced in the air. It was summertime in other areas, a season of thriving vegetation, but although we searched high and low, we could find nothing green.

Setting off at 10:00 a.m., by 3:00 we had come to an asbestos mining area, actually the town of Mangnai on the border between Xinjiang and Qinghai. It is an open-air asbestos mine operated by both machine and manpower. Carried by strong winds, the white asbestos powder permeates the air over an area of dozens of kilometres. It settles on human bodies, roof tops, electric wires and posts, a veritable world of asbestos.

The local people cannot escape from asbestos, especially since it constitutes the main source of their income. They can only wear face masks to protect themselves, creating quite a strange sight.

Marco Polo also wrote about asbestos in his book, calling it "salamander". He found it at the edge of a desert in a "mountain with a rich vein of steel and *ondanique*. In this same mountain occurs a vein from which is produced salamander.... When the stuff found in this vein of which you have heard has been dug out of the mountain and crumbled into bits, the particles cohere and form fibres like wool. Accordingly, when the stuff has been extracted, it is first dried, then pounded in a large copper mortar and then washed. The residue consists of this fibre of which I have spoken and worthless earth, which is separated from it. Then this wool-like fibre is carefully spun and made into cloths. When the cloths are first

This 104-year-old man was a native of the Lop Nur area. When he was 35, his family was forced to move to the Miran area due to a severe drought that dried up all the lakes (1). In Ruqiang, the local people make a kind of flat bread as big as that made by the Han Chinese in the Hexi Corridor (2). Although quite remote, this place is not totally cut off from the outside world, as seen by these posters of Chinese and foreign films (3). In their leisure time people gather together and listen to the imam discuss the Koran (4). The dongbula is a musical instrument played by the Uygur people to accompany singing and dancing. The grandfather of this family is an expert of the art, and is known throughout the region (5). A little post office in Ruqiang (6).



3



4



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3

made, they are far from white. But they are thrown into the fire and left there for a while; and there they turn as white as snow. And whenever one of these cloths is soiled or discoloured, it is thrown into the fire and left there a while, and it comes out as white as snow.... Let me tell you finally that one of these cloths is now at Rome; it was sent to the Pope by the Great Khan as a valuable gift, and for this reason the sacred napkin of our lord Jesus Christ was wrapped in it."

Other translations of *The Travels* state that the cloth given to the Pope was brought back by the elder Polo, and bore inscriptions in gold reading, "Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Judging from his description, the asbestos industry thrived under Kublai Khan's reign, and at that time was still unknown in the Western world. In fact, when Marco Polo first returned to his native Venice and mentioned the existence of such a material, his country people all laughed at him, thinking he had imagined it.

An Oil City in the Desert

After leaving Mangnai we headed southeastward, temporarily bidding farewell to the bald Altun Mountains and entering the desert area of the Qaidam Basin. Having passed through Youshashan, we came to the banks of Qashu Lake, a salt lake. Its deep blue water makes a striking contrast to the yellow sandy shores, which are themselves covered with a thick layer of salt and alkaline as white as snow.

Driving eastward we stopped at another town also called Mangnai, but this one only consisted of a few houses built of mud and an inn accommodating drivers. The whole place is like a solitary hidden rock standing in the vast ocean of the desert. From here we turned northward and the topography began to change. The ground here was covered with strangely-shaped rocks overgrown with white powdered crystals which we were told were Glauber's salt (sodium sulphate).



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Further on we passed a number of villages bearing funny names such as Youdunzi (Oily Mound), Dafengshan (Strong Wind Hill) and Niubiziliang (Ox's Nose Ridge). At Niubiziliang we returned to the embrace of the Altun Mountains, then turning eastward we soon reached Lenghu, an oil city in Qinghai Province.

The city of Lenghu was originally a salt lake. Located at a high altitude and in a frigid zone, it has no vegetation. The discovery of oil, however, has brought both people and vitality to this barren area. Today there are shopping arcades, cinemas, a TV station and hotels, but still one sees neither animals nor plants anywhere.

Departing from Lenghu our car climbed up Dangjin Pass, the main passage leading to Gansu Province. A line consisting of all kinds of vehicles ran up the spiralling mountain road. Our car crawled up laboriously, and after passing through Dangjin Pass we turned northward and descended down the steep road. Mt. Dangjin is 4,000 metres above sea level, while Dunhuang is only 1,000 metres above sea level, therefore we made a drop of nearly 3,000 metres in just 100 kilometres. Our car glided down swiftly to Dunhuang, consuming no more than two litres of petrol.

Translated by Anne Yan



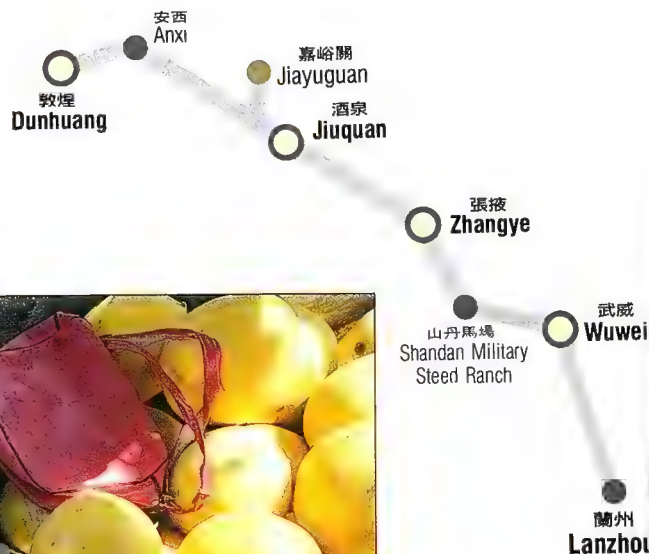
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The tall diversiform-leaved poplar tree is the hallmark of a desert oasis. It is able to grow and even flourish, with deep roots and luxuriant leaves, as long as there is a little water in the sand (1). Once past the Altun Mountains, drinking water becomes even more precious, as the few lakes in the Qaidam Basin are all saltwater lakes (2). This is a type of large-wheeled vehicle which one can use to cross the desert (if one dares), thus avoiding the 1,000-kilometre detour our authors had to make (3). In Mangnai, people must cover their faces to avoid breathing in asbestos powder (4). The authors' long, arduous journey through southern Xinjiang is nearing its end, as Qinghai Province looms in the distance (5). These old trees have dried up as a result of the river changing its course (6).

PART SIX



A Ten-Day Trip Across the Hexi Corridor

When the traveller has ridden for these thirty days of which I have spoken across the desert, he reaches a city called Sa-chau, lying towards the east-north-east, which is subject to the Great Khan. It lies in a province called Tangut, whose inhabitants are all idolaters.... They do not live by trade, but on the profit of the grain which they harvest from the soil. They have many abbeyes and monasteries, all full of idols of various forms to which they make sacrifices and do great honour and reverence.

Let us now pass on to Kan-cháu, a large and splendid city in Tangut proper and the capital of the whole province....

When the traveller leaves Kan-chau, he journeys eastward for five days through a country haunted by spirits, whom he often hears talking in the night, till he reaches a kingdom called Erguiul. This is subject to the Great Khan....

... There are many wild cattle here, as big as elephants and very handsome in appearance....

This country produces the best and finest musk in the world....

— The Travels of Marco Polo

Although the names of the places Marco Polo mentions have naturally changed in 700 years, most of them are still in the same locations. For example Sa-chau is today's well-known city of Dunhuang, whose grottoes and Buddhist statues were extant long before Marco Polo's arrival. The province he refers to as Tangut was a large province of the Tartars (Mongols) ruled by the Great Khan, roughly covering today's Gansu and Shaanxi provinces and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Kan-chau is today's Zhangye, and the kingdom called Erguiul is the area around Wuwei, both in Gansu Province.

Throughout his book Marco Polo continually labelled the local people "idolaters", because they worshipped idols and images that he neither recognized nor understood. We know now that what he saw was most likely Buddhism, as there is a great deal of very ancient Buddhist art in this region. It is even quite possible that he visited the Big Buddha Temple in Zhangye, today a well-known tourist site, as his description of a temple he visited there matches it perfectly: "These huge idols are recumbent, and groups of lesser ones are set round about them...."

In fact, much of what Marco Polo saw is still the same today. The "wild cattle" (yaks) still roam the hills (although they are not quite as big as elephants!) and musk deer still live in the region. Few people believe these days that there are spirits that haunt the Hexi (Gansu) Corridor, but a great many of the customs and ways of life that he observed are practised not only here but in other parts of China as well. Travelling in these parts, one gets a strong feeling for the history and continuity of this ancient civilization.





Changcheng (Great Wall) Village in Wuwei lies close to the westernmost edge of the Tengger Desert. It is possible that Marco Polo entered the desert from here, going eastward to Ningxia.





In ancient times the Hexi (West of the Yellow River) Corridor was accessible by two alternative routes from Central Asia, either through Yangguan Pass in the south or through Yumenguan Pass in the north, both leading to the ancient city of Dunhuang. Marco Polo and his party reached Dunhuang, then called Sa-chau, by way of Lop Nur and Yangguan Pass. The vast waters in Lop Nur, the bustling, ancient town of Lop and the solid walls of Yangguan Pass have all been swept away by history, but Dunhuang still enjoys prosperity.

Twelve years ago, one of our authors stayed for a time in Dunhuang. Then, everywhere there was yellow clay; even the houses were built of clay. There was only one main street and even a small hotel was difficult to find. Now, Dunhuang has become a city, crisscrossed by wide, clean streets with buses going to all points.

Among the crowds quite a few Westerners and Japanese Buddhists can be seen, the latter of which take a special interest in the Buddhist tradition here. The influx of foreign tourists has made the hotel industry a booming business, with over a dozen major hotels to choose from. Even so, they are all packed out during peak seasons, leaving hardly any room for those who come too late.

We visited the Mingsha (Singing Sand) Hill to see if there had been any changes after twelve years. Indeed there were, for it seemed as if the hill had actually moved from its original position. We slowly climbed up the hill, the grains of sand warm under our feet and the breeze carrying a welcome coolness. Standing on the hilltop at twilight, the sand dunes below were studded with the moving shadows of Chinese and foreign tourists. As the curious tourists slid down the slopes of the sand dunes, sand rolled down to the accompaniment of shouts and laughter. Perhaps this is how the Singing Sand Hill had managed to change its location.

On the distant tracks leading into the hill, camels scurried about, ready to be hired by tourists for rides to and from the sand dunes. After sliding down the hill, we found ourselves by the side of the Yueya (Crescent Moon) Spring. The water in the spring reflected the violet sky and pinkish-white clouds, while reeds nearby stirred in the gentle breeze. It was already 9:30 p.m., but the sun had not yet set. The slanting sun rays penetrated between the dunes and enveloped the hill in a golden glow.

Dunhuang — A Gathering Place for Old and New Immigrants

We came back to Dunhuang at 10:30 p.m., when night finally fell. Sitting at a small restaurant by the roadside, we heard people around us talking in the northern Chinese dialect. We were finally relieved of conversations in unintelligible languages which had frustrated us for nearly a month, and could now freely talk and ask questions without the need for "interpreters" or "guides", and without the fear of violating social taboos.

The manager of our hotel, on the other hand, spoke with a Central Plains accent, which was soon confirmed when she told us that she was a native of Henan Province. Thirty years before, almost half of the people in her village were driven out by famine, forced to travel along the ancient Silk Road to eke out a living in the Hexi Corridor.

In time, the relatively fertile regions such as Dunhuang, Anxi, Jiuguang and Zhangye became a second homeland for people from the eastern provinces. In fact, the so-called "natives of Hexi" may be traced, for the most part, to descendants of immigrants from eastern provinces or soldiers sent to guard the frontiers throughout history. The real natives were either forced to move to Central Asia due to endless wars between ethnic groups, or they have been assimilated through peaceful coexistence with the Han people.

Today, as in Marco Polo's time, the people in Dunhuang are still basically engaged in agriculture. This area is well known for its peaches, apricots, pears and cotton, as well as its wheat. Located at the lowest end of the Hexi Corridor and blessed with a warm climate, plenty of sunshine and abundant water resources, Dunhuang has been able to preserve at least some of its historical importance over the centuries.

However, the remark made by Marco Polo that the people here "do not live by trade" no longer holds true. Now, almost all farmers in the vicinity of the city do some business in addition to their farming. Other than selling fruit, cereals or cotton, they might also open restaurants, inns or organize transportation teams. Some even bring their camels or horses to the Singing Sand Hill and solicit tourists to take rides around the sand dunes.

Early the next day, we paid a visit to the Mogao Grottoes, where the above-mentioned author stayed for a time twelve years ago. In the caves, the small courtyard in which she had spent two months was still there, looking much as it did back then. There was the small cabin she had used as a darkroom, but the young tree outside the window had grown quite big. Nevertheless, the caves are now under much stricter management rules. Twelve years before, she had freely entered the nearly one hundred caves to take photographs, but this time was not so easy. After showing our identification documents and doing much pleading, we were finally permitted to climb up the hilltop to take a bird's-eye photograph of the Mogao Grottoes.

A Melon Festival in Anxi

Soon after midday, the air became dry and hot. Our car left Dunhuang and pulled onto Highway 313 for Anxi. Blasts of hot wind rushed into the car and against our faces. Before us, the smooth black asphalt road, melting and shining under the scorching sun, stretched far into the distance. There were hardly any pedestrians or approaching vehicles anywhere.

As we drove into Anxi, fields, trees, villages and people appeared suddenly along the roads. We happened to arrive just as the Melon Festival of the Hexi Corridor was being held. We drove directly to the melon market to quench the thirst caused by our tiring journey, as well as to see this rare event. It was just towards the end of melon season, and both muskmelons and brilliant Yellow River honey melons were piled high everywhere.

Adults were busy selling the melons, while children slept lazily on melon piles. People were crowding around the vendors and haggling in loud voices. After being weighed and paid for, the melons were loaded onto trucks and tractors. Bustling Anxi County still lives up to its ancient name of "the Melon Prefecture". Having eaten all we could, we filled up our car with the delicious fruit. Heat and fatigue had vanished, and we were on the road again, refreshed and in high spirits.

The Hexi Corridor is a peculiar gift of nature. It stretches over 1,200 kilometres from east to west, but its width from north to south varies from a mere 10 kilometres to 100 kilometres at most. To its north is an expanse of barren deserts, and to its south rise the lofty Qilian Mountains, covered with snow. The Qilian

Mountains run parallel to the Hexi Corridor for over 1,000 kilometres, providing irrigation through the melted snow and ice that flow down the mountains. For this reason, this is the most fertile area in Gansu Province, with abundant harvests and rich grasslands for raising animals.

A Night in Jiayuguan

On our third day in the Hexi Corridor it began raining, a rare experience in this region. It was a very fine drizzle, just enough to moisten the air but not enough to alter our plans. We had arranged that day to pay a visit to the ancient Wei and Jin tombs and Caohu. Our guide led us into the bleak desert, where tombs from both the Wei and Jin dynasties (220-420) were discovered in 1972. One of the most important discoveries were bricks with pictures painted on them, a surprise to both Chinese and foreign archaeologists. The bricks were either inscribed or painted with scenes from the dead person's life, as well as scenes depicting daily activities of the society at that time, such as farming, picking mulberry leaves, raising silkworms or feeding cattle.

If these painted bricks were realistic works by ancient artists, it may be inferred that this place was a bustling communications hub about 2,000 years ago. According to the staff at the Administration Office of Cultural Relics, if all the tombs in this region were excavated and connected into an "underground palace", they would cover almost as much space as the terra-cotta army of the Qin Dynasty found near Xi'an.

Our next stop, Caohu, adjoins a stretch of desert and people make a living by raising camels and sheep. On the average, one household raises 200 camels, whose wool they sell at quite a good price. The continuous rain brought joy to the local people, who regarded it as a rare blessing by nature; but to us, the rain meant it was impossible to photograph. Worse was that our car got stuck on the road to Caohu. Three country folk, with the friendliness and warm-heartedness characteristic of the Hexi people, came to our rescue. With shovels and a tractor, and after much effort in the rain, our car was finally extricated from the mud.

Towards evening, the rain stopped. The sky appeared an extraordinary blue, and the white walls of the houses were tinged pink by the red clouds. We rushed to Jiayuguan Fortress and took snapshots of the magnificent colours. In the distance, the Qilian Mountains were hidden behind a white veil — snow on the mountain tops and rain at the foot of the mountains. The western sky was a surging sea of red clouds, which heralded fine weather for the next day.

Wanting to get some photos of the fortress at sunrise, at 7:00 in the morning we drove our car again towards Jiayuguan Fortress. Unfortunately, our car got stuck again and we had no choice but to walk the rest of the way. Standing against the snow-capped Qilian Mountains, Jiayuguan Fortress radiated a red light, like a palace inhabited by supernatural beings. At the foot of the fortress, we met a guide for a group of German tourists, who corroborated yesterday's weather prediction, saying that he had been here several times but had never seen such fine weather.

On to Zhangye

On our fifth day, we came to Jiuquan (meaning "wine spring"). The fatigue that had accumulated over the past few days and the disturbance to our regular habits had tired us down and given us indigestion. We had to brace ourselves up to see the newly renovated "Wine Spring" and to have a cursory glance of the city, and then spent the rest of the day lying in the Jiuquan Hotel.

Still feeling giddy, we continued on our way and reached Zhangye on the sixth day. We visited the Big Buddha Temple, a wooden pagoda and saw sections of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) Great Wall ruins.

Marco Polo arrived in Zhangye around 1272 and stayed there for approximately one year. In his book, he gave detailed description of Zhangye, referring to it as Kan-chau and calling it "a large

and splendid city". At that time, Jiuquan was called Su-chau, and today's name for Gansu Province is actually a combination of these two names, a fact that testifies to the importance of these places in the province.

On the seventh day, we set out from Zhangye early in the morning and made our way southward to visit the Shandan Military Steed Ranch. We turned southeast at Nangucheng along the Qilian Mountains and finally reached Damaying Prairie, along the Shandan River. For centuries, this prairie has been a luxuriant natural pastureland. It is said that since the Han Dynasty, and through many other dynasties, it was used as a horse ranch. During the Sui and Tang dynasties (581-907) there were over 100,000 horses here. The Northern Wei, Western Xia and Yuan dynasties also designated this place as an imperial horse ranch.

Nourished by the water and grasses of Shandan, the Shandan horse is virile, elegant and strong-willed, a favourite of both the military and farmers. At present, the Shandan Military Steed Ranch covers an area of over 200,000 hectares, the largest of its kind in Asia. In addition to the grassland and snow-capped Qilian Mountains, there is a large reservoir and a vast stretch of primitive forest in Shandan, making it a most intriguing place.

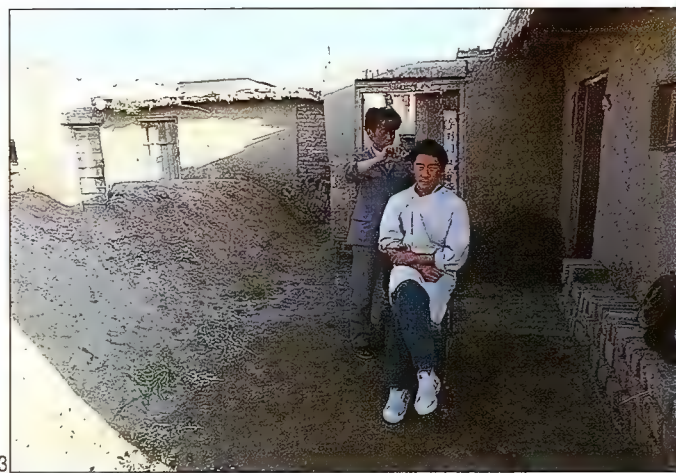
These sand dunes, where merchants from the Central Plains and Western Regions gathered in the past, are now a popular tourist attraction (1). The highway from Dunhuang to Anxi runs parallel to the ancient Silk Road. Along the way one can see beacon towers built during the Han and Tang dynasties (2). The value of the sculptures and murals in the Mogao Grottoes increases yearly. Marco Polo often mentioned seeing temples and the worship of "idols" in his book (3).



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This state-owned shopping centre in Wuwei was once the site of a brothel on the Silk Road (1). August is the wheat harvesting season in the Hexi Corridor. Watermelons are now also in season, providing a welcome refreshment for the hard-working farmers (2). Herdsmen at the Shandan Military Steed Ranch help each other with haircuts (3). The "Wine Spring" that the city of Jiuquan is named after has been newly renovated (4). These large cakes made in Gansu are much bigger and thicker than Xinjiang's nang cakes (5). Even the children in Gansu wear traditional Uygur hats (6). In Zhangye, during Marco Polo's time, artists painted pictures of gods, but today portrait-painting is preferred (7). Photo developing shops on the old street in Wuwei do a brisk business (8). Funeral ceremonies seen today in Wuwei's Chengguan Town are surprisingly similar to Marco Polo's description of a funeral he saw during his travels (9). The gateway of the ancient tower at Wuwei forms a unique sight (10).



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The military steed ranch has many sub-ranches. As we drove aimlessly across mountains and grassland, we found ourselves in the domain of the No. 1 sub-ranch. The ranch was staffed by over 2,000 people, mainly engaged in raising horses and farming, including growing highland barley and rape. This year, a serious drought had hit the grassland. It was just early autumn, but the grass had already begun to wither and turn yellow. However, we were told that it only takes one good rainfall to make the grass green again.

Marco Polo's "Wild Cattle"

In the evening, we left the ranch and continued on our way along the northern slope of the Qilian Mountains until we reached Yongchang, where we stayed the night. On our eighth day we left Yongchang and again penetrated the bleak desert. At noon, we arrived in Wuwei.

Wuwei is located at the easternmost end of the Hexi Corridor. It is shielded by mountains on three sides, and to its northeast lies the great Tengger Desert. With fertile land and ample sunshine, coupled with the advantage of being irrigated by melted snow from the Qilian Mountains, it is known as "Silver Wuwei", meaning a land of abundance.

The history of the ancient city of Wuwei can be traced back over 2,000 years. It was under the occupation of the Xiongnu (Huns) in the early Western Han Dynasty. Later, in order to open up a passageway to Central Asia, Emperor Wudi (r. 140-87 B.C.) sent two generals to defeat the Xiongnu troops and establish Wuwei Prefecture. Towards the end of the Western Han Dynasty it

began to be called Liangzhou, meaning "the cool prefecture", presumably because winter sets in early in this region. In Marco Polo's time it was called Erguiul, and then later became today's Wuwei.

Marco Polo offered a detailed description of Wuwei in his book. He said that cereals were plentiful, and the inhabitants were all Buddhists ("idolaters"). He also wrote that he had seen a kind of large animal, "covered with long hair, except on the back, and ... white and black in colour. The length of their hair is fully three palms. They are so handsome that they are a wonder to behold". He wrote that it was a hardy species and, after being tamed, could be used as a beast of burden.

This animal can only be the yak, raised by the Tibetan people in the Qilian Mountains at that time. Later, as we were crossing over Wushaoling Pass in our car, we spotted groups of long-haired yaks on the grassy slopes. Today, as in Marco Polo's time, they are used for ploughing, as beasts of burden, or for riding. It is incredible to think that Marco Polo was quite probably the first European to ever see a yak. In fact, he brought some yak hair with him back to Italy, which impressed people greatly with its fine texture. Some said it was finer even than silk.

A Funeral and a "Red Light District"

On the ninth day, as we roamed about Wuwei, we came upon a funeral procession. The coffin was sheltered by a canopy of blue cotton curtains and decorated magnificently with white couplets, colourful wreaths and objects made of paper. Anything the dead might yearn for but could not get in this life, is made for him — albeit of paper — after his death. There might be an elegant build-





ing, a "Crown" limousine, a big "Toshiba" colour TV set or a "Sharp" refrigerator — anything short of a jet plane. This age-old Chinese tradition goes back centuries, and was observed by Marco Polo during his travels to this area.

What he saw was actually a "marriage" of two dead children, whose parents arranged for the two to be together in the afterlife, also a custom still practised today in certain regions. He described the funeral-marriage in great detail, writing, "They draw pictures on paper of men in the guise of slaves, and of horses, clothes, coins, and furniture, and then burn them; and they declare that all these become the possessions of their children in the next world...."

According to Chinese tradition, the dead must lie in state for seven days for relatives and friends to pay their last respects. Here, however, this occurs while a tape recorder blasts out local operas or Western music, or a folk orchestra plays old music pieces from the Northwest to the accompaniment of a *suona*, a woodwind instrument. But with the exception of the tape recorder and Western music, the customs practised here are almost exactly the same as they were 700 years ago.

On a street corner we noticed an unusual-looking shop building. When we inquired about it, an old man told us pensively that it was built by a rich man some 50 years before. A close look around it made us suspect that it could not have been originally used as shops. On the second floor, there were many small rooms, already dilapidated and slanting to one side. The posts in front of these rooms, newly painted red, made a strange contrast. Nevertheless, it was actually used as shops now. The shop manager told us that there was a similar building nearby, which, according to old

residents, was originally a warehouse. So, it was very likely that both buildings were once brothels — the red light district of Wuwei.

Our next stop was Wuwei's Confucius Temple, where we saw dozens of horizontal boards inscribed with Chinese characters in the handwriting of important people. The earliest was dedicated in the 57th year of the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1718) of the Qing Dynasty and the latest one in 1922, spanning over two centuries. Big pine and cypress trees were planted in the temple grounds, and ancient inscribed stone tablets were once kept inside. As a matter of fact, this temple is the largest and best-preserved structure of all the ancient buildings in the Hexi Corridor and Gansu Province.

On the tenth day, not long after we left Wuwei and made our way southeastward, we began our ascent of the Wushaoling Mountains. After we passed Gulang, the mountains became increasingly steep. The flat and unobstructed Hexi Corridor was reaching its end. With a great deal of effort, our car crossed over the Wushaoling Pass, passed Tianzhu and Yongdeng, and headed towards Lanzhou, one of the most important cities in Northwest China.

Translated by Xia Ping

The Hexi Corridor, over 1,000 kilometres long, is fed by water from the Qilian Mountains (1). The Shandan Military Steed Ranch was once an imperial horse breeding centre (2).

阿拉善左旗
Alxa Left Banner

鎮北堡
Zhenbei
Fortress

銀川
Yinchuan

靖遠
Jingyuan

中衛
Zhongwei

蘭州
Lanzhou

PART SEVEN



Traversing the Ancient Land of the Western Xia

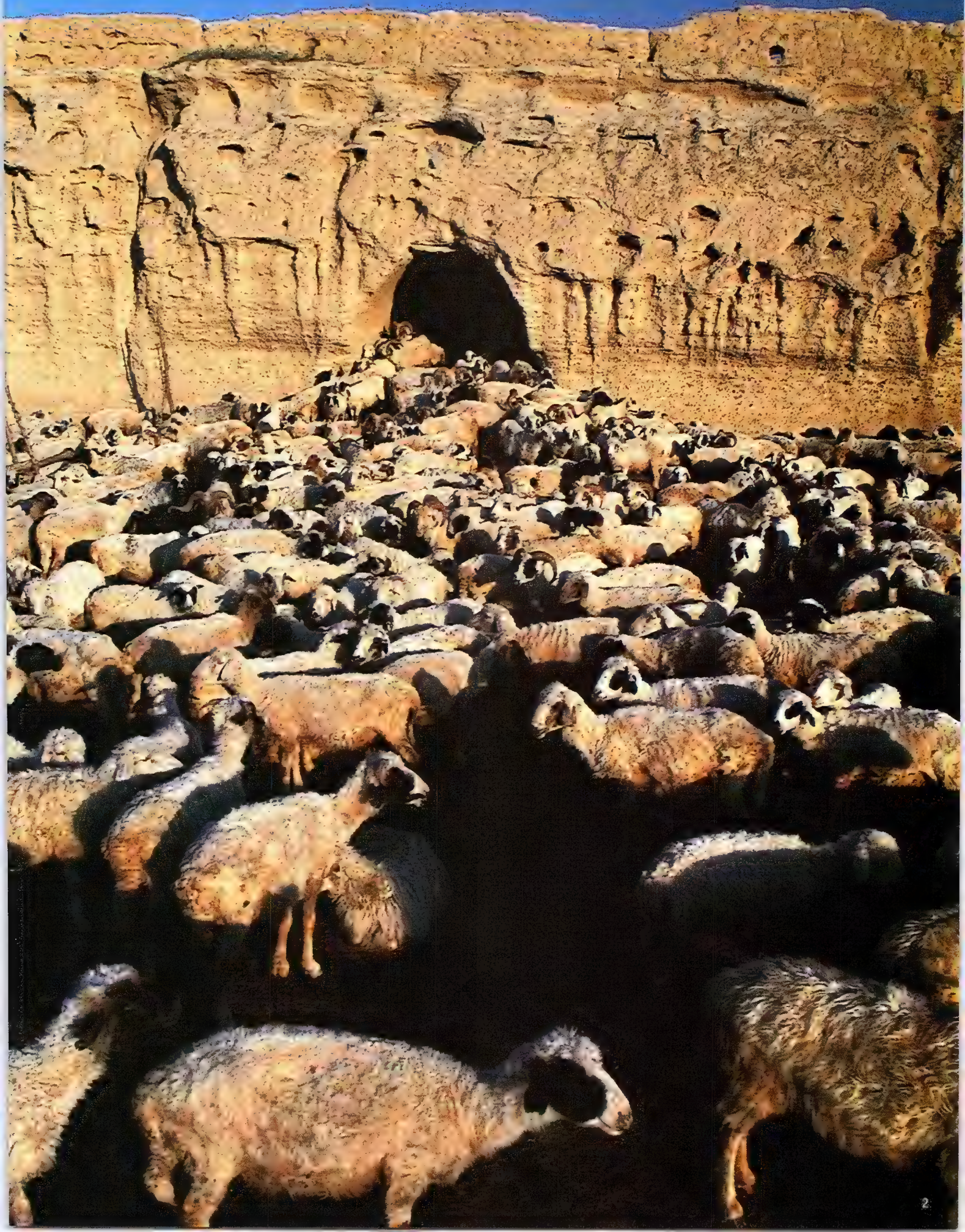
When the traveller leaves Erguiul and journeys eastwards for eight days, he reaches another province of Tangut called Egrigaia, where there are cities and towns in plenty. The chief city is called Kalachan. The inhabitants are idolaters, but there are three churches of Nestorian Christians. They are subject to the Great Khan. In this city the finest camlets in the world are made of camel hair. Camlets are also made of white wool; these are white camlets, and they are produced in great abundance and of excellent quality....

— *The Travels of Marco Polo*

Today the area referred to by Marco Polo as Egrigaia is Ningxia Province, although there have been changes with respect to its size and boundaries. The city of Kalachan was probably in what is now Alxa League in Inner Mongolia, and the "camlets" mentioned in his book are apparently a kind of cloth made of camel wool. We, however, saw no camels until we were approaching Inner Mongolia, where customs are more similar than in Ningxia to those he observed over 700 years ago.

This part of our journey took us from Lanzhou north to the Helan Mountains, following the Yellow River. We had actually made a detour by coming to Lanzhou, not on Marco Polo's route. His contingent, escorted by the imperial guards of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), took a short cut along the southern fringes of the Tengger Desert, spending no more than eight days travelling from Wuwei to Yinchuan in Ningxia, a distance of over 500 kilometres.

The Sunni mosque at Najiahu Village is quite well known in Ningxia (1). Zhenbei Fortress, built in the Ming Dynasty as a military fortification against the Mongols, today serves as a sheepfold (2).





One side of Little Tian'anmen's reviewing stand has been turned into a mutton restaurant.



清真饭馆

羊肉泡馍

羊肉揪子面

羊肉手擀面

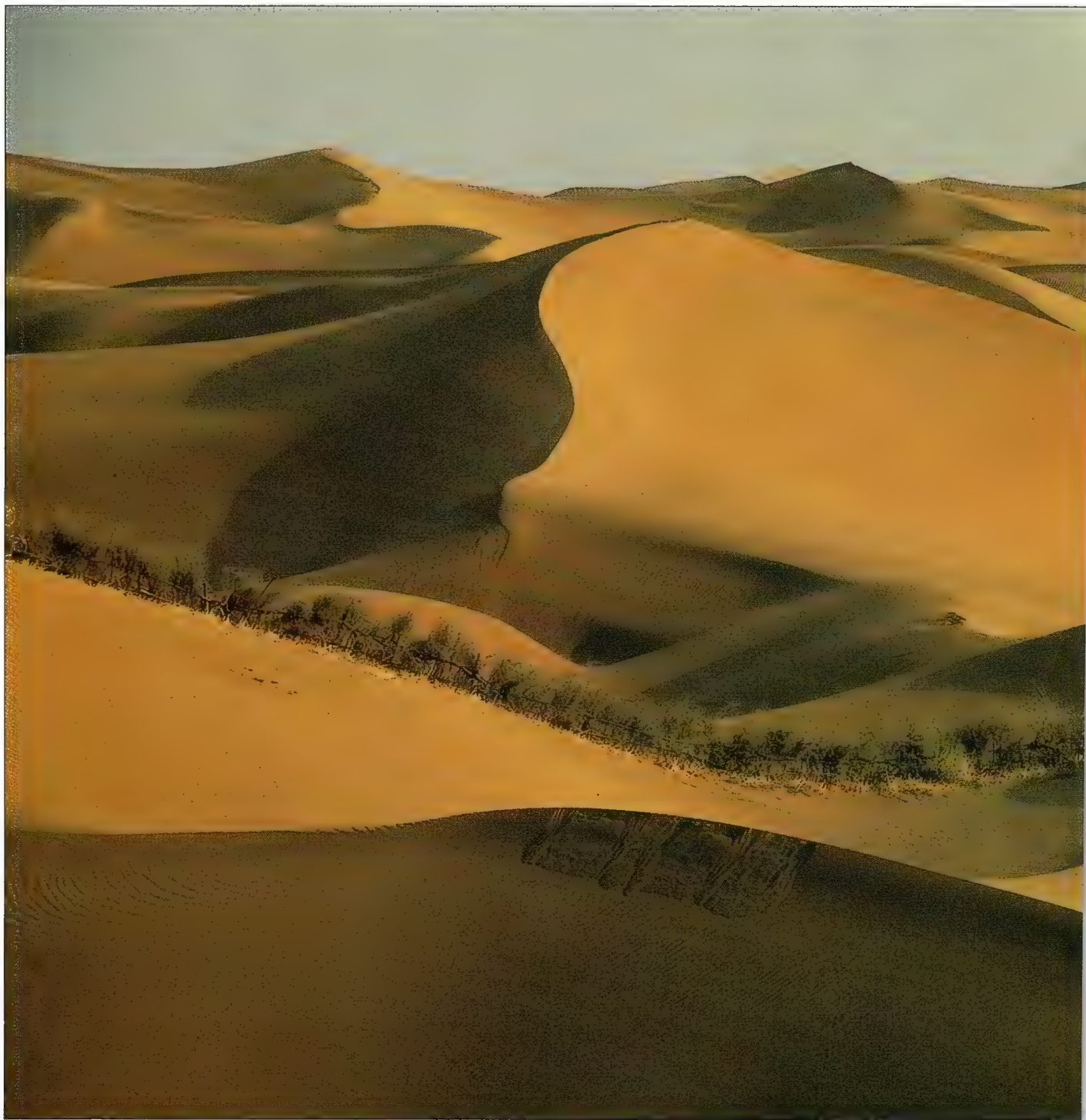
羊肉拌面

刀削炒面

八宝盖碗茶

米饭炒菜

凉菜拼盘



In Lanzhou we rested for some time to refresh ourselves and to overhaul the vehicle that had carried us for over 4,000 kilometres. We set out early on a September morning, leaving Lanzhou and driving northwards to the town of Zhongwei, where we would pick up the route followed by Marco Polo.

We had lunch at Jingyuan, and while chatting with the restaurant owner, we saw out the window a drum tower in the town centre. He told us that almost every town in Gansu Province has a drum tower and that they differ from one another only in size and date of construction. We thought back on all the towns we had passed and realized that he was right. In the Hexi area even Yongchang, a tiny town, has a drum tower very much like the one in Jiuquan, although the former is much smaller in size.

Ancient Waterwheels on the Yellow River

By evening we had arrived at Mojiatou in Zhongwei County, Ningxia. A vehicular ferry took us across the still and peaceful Yel-

low River. The water in this part of the river was beginning to take on a yellowish colour, but was much clearer than the muddier sections which flow through the Shaanxi-Shanxi Canyon and other places in Henan and Shandong provinces. The sun was already setting when our car passed Zhongwei. We could not afford to stop, so we rushed across town and headed straight for Shapotou, a town nearby. It was already dark when we got to the Shahuang Research Institute, where we were to stay the night.

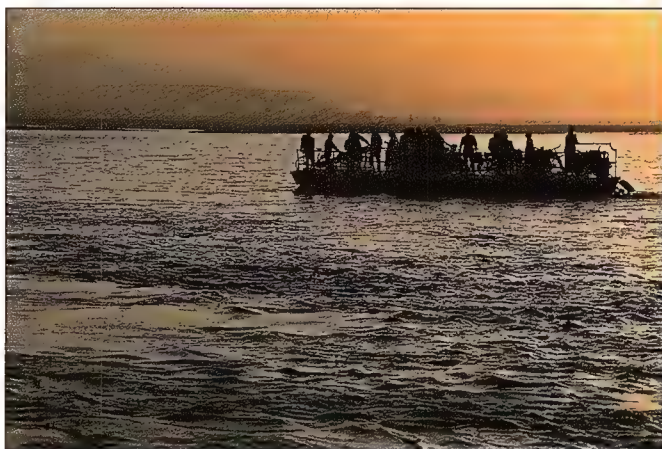
At 7 a.m. the next day we took a drive to see some sand dunes nearby. Soon the sun was shining on the great Yellow River, whose banks had been turned into fertile paddy fields. Beyond the river's northern bank lies the Tengger Desert, a vast expanse of land more than 40,000 square kilometres in size. For years clouds of sand used to blow in from the desert in the north, burying numerous villages and fields. In the end the local residents realized that they had no alternative but to fight for their survival. In 1958 a research institute was established at Shapotou, subsequently becom-



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ing very successful in bringing the desert under control.

Shapotou now claims to be a very popular desert sightseeing spot in Ningxia. Tourists who come here can not only see the desert and the Yellow River, but can also ride in a sheep-skin raft on the river, or ride horses or camels to simulate the desert expeditions of old.

The man in the Sheep-skin Raft Rental Shop told us that the village was also named Shapotou and that the village on the southern bank of the river was called Xiaheyuan, where a few Yellow

The sand-control area at Shapotou is an experimental area set up by the State to control the encroaching desert. Seven hundred years ago, Marco Polo entered Egrigaia (Ningxia) along the edge of this region (1). The Yellow River bathed in the brilliance of the rising sun (2). The sheep-skin raft is a traditional means of crossing the Yellow River (3). The gently flowing Yellow River in Ningxia suddenly surges ahead once it enters the valley between Shaanxi and Shanxi (4). A Yellow River ferry in Lingwu County (5).



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River waterwheels still remained. We ferried across the river and spotted the wreckage of two waterwheels. Although no longer in use, the waterwheels are still a reminder of the supreme and mighty power they wielded in their heyday, with their giant skeletons rising high on the vast open spaces of the banks.

Entering Waterwheel Village, we were told by the villagers that the waterwheels had fallen into disuse over a dozen years ago. While the other waterwheels along the river had already been dismantled, the two remaining ones in their village were saved from total destruction due to the timely intervention of the county's bureau of tourism, which also hired an old keeper to guard the waterwheels.

The Renovation of 108 Pagodas

It was not until 3:00 in the afternoon that we at last had our first meal of the day. We returned to Zhongwei, where we had planned to take a walk and look around the town, but as soon as we got out of the car a yellow cloud of sand blew in our faces and it immediately started to rain. The only thing we could do was to get back into our car and to drive on towards Qingtongxia, about half-way to our destination of Yinchuan. We stayed overnight in Qingtongxia and the next morning decided to pay a visit to the Qingtongxia Reservoir, near which are 108 pagodas that we wanted to see.

At the reservoir we boarded a tourist boat which took us to the other side in a few minutes. The pagodas had all been renovated, resulting in a completely new look. From records on the renovation work, we learnt that the renovation was actually a kind of "restoration" done by peeling off the layers of plaster that had been added over several dynasties. The result revealed the pagodas' original style, that of the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

Of all the pagodas in the county, this group of 108 Buddhist pagodas is unique in both size and layout. It is in the shape of an isosceles triangle, with one pagoda at the highest point and three pagodas forming each of the second and third rows. The fourth and fifth rows consist of five pagodas each, the sixth row seven pagodas, the seventh nine pagodas, the eighth eleven pagodas and so on. The last and lowest row consists of 19 pagodas.

The twelve rows of pagodas are all built along the mountain slope, affording a spectacular sight. Although these brick-and-stone pagodas are considered to be architecture from the Song Dynasty, during the renovation some pieces of written material and embroidered cloth from the Western Xia Dynasty (1032-1227) were unearthed. However, regardless of which dynasty supervised their construction, there is little doubt that these beautiful structures were here in Marco Polo's time, although there are no specific references to them in his book.

Apart from its pagodas, Qingtongxia is also renowned for its 44 temples located in Niushou (Ox Head) Mountain, plus its prairies, forests and vast expanses of reed marshes. As we had planned to cover a long distance within a limited time, we were obliged to skip these scenic wonders and continue our journey north.

A Little Tian'anmen and a Sand Lake

It was 1:00 p.m. when we arrived in Yinchuan. Located in the centre of Yinchuan's old city, Little Tian'anmen is a reproduction of the Tian'anmen (Gate of Heavenly Peace) in Beijing, although the former is much smaller in size. Like the original, there is a square in front and a reviewing stand on each side. But, compared with the grandeur of the square in Beijing, Little Tian'anmen appears much less solemn and awesome. Beneath the reviewing stands we saw small restaurants and butcher shops, and all over the little

square we heard the shouts of the owners as they tried to solicit customers.

Wherever we went during our journey, it seemed we were always climbing either towers or pagodas, as if Chinese culture had been concentrated in this one region. On the following day, we continued our cultural tour and rode to the northern suburbs to visit Haibao Pagoda. This nine-storey pagoda is 54 metres in height and has quite an extraordinary design. If it were cut in half down the middle, it would reveal a cross-section that resembles the Chinese character 亞. The pagoda overlooks the vast Yinchuan Plain at the Great Bend of the Yellow River with the undulating Helan Mountains stretching out in the west. The mountains were clad in delicate blue and purple shades, with not a single inch of greenness anywhere.

That afternoon we took another tour with some friends to Shahu (Sand Lake), situated more than 30 kilometres northwest of Yinchuan's old city. When we arrived we found that the place truly did deserve its name. Tourists were making their way in boats through the labyrinth of 72 lakes by detouring around one sand hill after another. Suddenly it began to pour and our boat darted through the reeds and sand hills to hurry back to shore.

Fortresses Now in Ruins

Accompanied by friends we set out early the next morning to see the rock paintings at the Helan Mountain Pass. We left the old city and after a long ride on a country road, arrived at an urban area. We drove across the new city into a wilderness of rocks and wasteland, where there were few people and little cultivation. The far-away Qilian Mountains could still be seen at twilight. Before long we spotted a dilapidated earth fortress to the right of the highway. We turned off the highway and after several detours drove into a fortified town, which seemed somehow oddly familiar.

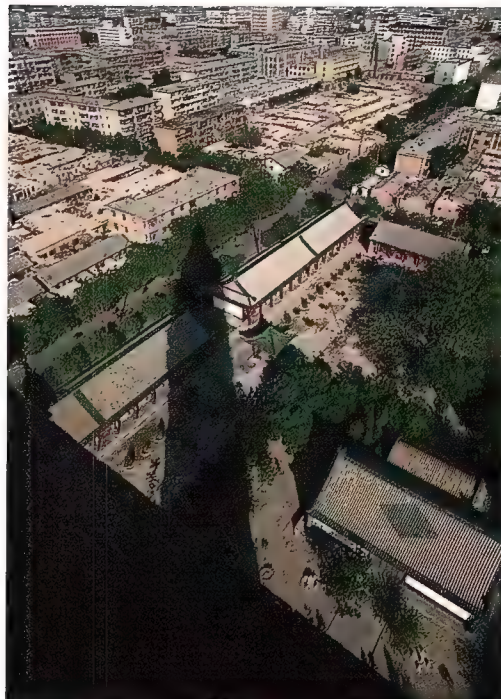
It turned out that this was none other than the exterior shooting location for the Chinese movie *Red Sorghum*. When we came out of the town we saw an even larger and more well-preserved fortress lying not far off to the north. A Mr. Li Baofeng from the Institute of Archaeology told us that it was the well-known Zhenbei Fortress.

Although perilous and precipitous, throughout history the Helan Mountains have been accessible via many mountain passes, which had to be guarded and protected. In order to prevent intrusion, the emperors of the Ming Dynasty had a number of fortresses built at each mountain pass. These fortresses were inhabited by soldiers who, on spotting the enemy troops, would light up smoke signals and assemble for the fight. Hundreds of years have passed since then, and these fortresses, no longer in use, have gradually fallen into ruin. The size of a small town in ancient times, the fortress could have accommodated an entire regiment of soldiers.

Zhenbei Fortress has only one gate, which is in the middle of the eastern wall with the Helan Mountains towering behind. As we were approaching the gate, we spotted a smaller building outside. We went in and were immediately overcome by a heavy odour of sheep. It turned out that this part of the fortress had been converted into an enormous sheepfold.

Rock Paintings and Inscriptions from the Western Xia

By 9:00 in the morning we had arrived at the Helan Mountain Pass. On either side the hills were barren except for rocks and weeds. The so-called Helan rock paintings were found in this area, known for their frank and somewhat primitive depictions of the



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The drum tower in Zhongwei is a venue for social activities (1). The old city area of Yinchuan (2). These watermelon pedlars in Jingyuan collect melon seeds to earn extra income while selling their own produce (3). Playing with tyres is a favourite pastime for the local children (4).

daily activities of an ancient nomadic tribe. The paintings show people hunting, playing games, farming and even performing sexual intercourse. Simple and concise, the paintings have an artistic and aesthetic appeal all their own.

We also saw carved inscriptions written in Western Xia characters. The Western Xia Kingdom had no written language, therefore, like the Japanese, the Western Xia people adopted the basic structure of Han Chinese characters. The difference is that the Western Xia people did so in their language by means of addition, whereas in Japanese often abbreviations were created. Halfway up a hill along the Helan Mountain Pass we also found paintings of humans, either with two horns on their head or with a face that resembled a sunflower. These were done at the same time as the other paintings, and represented two images of gods worshipped by these farming people.

At this mountain pass we ran across an interesting plant, which if it touches one's skin stings quite painfully. The plants we saw seemed to be several years old and were on average more than two feet in height. Although they looked smooth and thornless, the



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leaves of the plant bring a feeling of burning pain to the skin, even through one's clothing.

In the afternoon we went down to the Baisikou Mountain Pass, where we saw two bright, golden pagodas about to be renovated. One of the interesting facts about them, according to local residents, is that they are a couple; one is the male pagoda, the other the female pagoda. Even in size, one pagoda is much larger than the other.

The Looted and Pillaged Western Xia Imperial Tombs

Our next stop was to visit the Western Xia Imperial Tombs, which are situated on a wasteland next to the Helan Mountains, 25 kilometres away from the urban area of Yinchuan. The tombs stretch along the mountain slope from south to north for 14 kilometres. The main tombs are the resting places of nine emperors, and there are also more than 70 other tombs belonging to empresses, princes, princesses, courtiers and warriors.

We then visited the mausoleum of Li Yuanhao, the first emperor of the Western Xia Dynasty. Imperial tombs of the Western Xia are different from those of Han kingdoms, in that the tomb room is built not under a dome but under and in front of the projecting mourning table. The tombs of Li Yuanhao and his successors were unfortunately all dug up and looted by conquerors of the Yuan Dynasty. The surrounding palaces, towers, buildings and pavilions have also been burnt down, and today all that remains are some dilapidated walls and solitary mourning tables.

The mourning tables were the most conspicuous because of their size and height. In the distance they looked like haystacks commonly seen in the countryside south of the Yangtse River. We were told that originally each clay mourning table was enclosed by a wooden pagoda five or seven storeys high in the shape of an octahedron.

Towards the end of Western Xia Dynasty, Genghis Khan launched five fierce attacks on the Western Xia, only to find his armies suffering heavy losses and himself wounded by a poisoned arrow. Before his death he gave an order that all the members of Li's royal family be killed and the city be destroyed following the defeat of the Western Xia.

Later Genghis Khan's son and successor launched the sixth attack, which eventually led to the fall of this kingdom. The conqueror then ordered a deliberate, total destruction of the Western Xia Imperial Tombs to avenge the death of his emperor father. The treasures buried underground were dug up and taken away, the buildings all burnt down and the stelae that recorded the achievements of Western Xia emperors smashed to pieces.

All this occurred decades before Marco Polo passed through this region. At that time the area from the Helan Mountains extending to both sides of the Yellow River was under the control of the Mongolian armies.

Meeting a Caliph

The next day we went to visit a village named Najiahu in Yongning County, which is located to the south of Yinchuan. The inhabitants here are nearly all Muslims. Before we arrived at the village, we saw in the distance a dignified-looking mosque. To its left stood a tall Wangyue (Moon Viewing) Tower, very much like the gun tower that protected the premises of a rich Han family in those days. However, we soon recognized the Islamic symbol of a crescent moon and star on top of the tower.

We went in through the gate and saw a spacious courtyard, on both sides of which were rows of rooms serving as dormitories for the chief imam and his students. Opposite the gate across the courtyard was the prayer hall. In front and on each side of the prayer hall were massive, sturdy, antique Chinese scholartrees.

In appearance the buildings we saw were in typical Han-style architecture. But once inside, we saw that the entire interior was decorated according to Islamic style. The prayer hall, where

carpets were spread wall to wall, was enormous: over 1,000 faithful could kneel in prayer at one time. Behind the dormitory rooms on the left was a bathing hall, which was paved with patterned bricks and included several bathing pools and bathtubs.

In the reception room we met Murshid Ma, caliph (a Muslim ruler) of the Najiahu Mosque. He was already 91 but could still hear and see well and think fast. He told us, very proudly, that he had gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca the previous year with the help of his son. He said that any Muslim, not only caliphs, could be awarded the honorary title of imam if they had the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Home of Nescradin, a Famous General

Mr. Ma also related to us the village's history. According to him, there was an aristocrat named Nescradin in the Yuan Dynasty who joined Genghis Khan's eastern expedition and later settled down in Xi'an. Nescradin had many children and grandchildren who wanted to conform to Han custom, therefore they divided his name into Na, Su, La and Ding to make four Chinese surnames. This is why Ningxia has a village called Najiahu (Na family residence) and Xi'an has a village called Lajiacun (La family village).

Today it is the Na family in Ningxia that claims to be the most populous, with over 4,000 residents in the village of Najiahu. Ninety-seven per cent of them are Muslims and over half of them are descendants of Nescradin. In *The Travels*, Marco Polo gives a detailed account of General Nescradin's battle in 1272 against the armies of the King of Mien (Myanmar), whose territories Kublai Khan later conquered. Thus Nescradin and Marco Polo were contemporaries, and perhaps had even made one another's acquaintance.

Mr. Ma also told us that Muslims at Najiahu belong to the Sunni sect, whose caliphs are elected, rather than designated, as is the practice with other Islamic sects. When asked about the special products in Ningxia, the old man became enthusiastic. He recommended Tanyang (sand sheep) skin, Chinese wolfberry fruit, flagelliform star jelly, licorice root and inkslabs made from Helan rocks. He also recommended Ningxia mutton, which he said was the best mutton under the sun. He believed that mutton hot-pot actually originated in his hometown.

Having said goodbye to our Muslim friends in Najiahu, we headed straight for Shuidonggou, where relics of the Palaeolithic Era have been discovered. It stands on the banks of a Yellow River tributary, close to the ruins and signal towers of the Great Wall. In our group there were several people who were archaeology enthusiasts. They searched in the sand on both sides of the great wall and eventually found, to everyone's surprise, over a dozen small stones and variously-shaped sharpened objects of the Palaeolithic Era, according to them.

We left Shuidonggou and arrived at the foot of the Great Wall near Hengcheng. As I was climbing the dilapidated wall battlements, my foot hit a round object. I bent over and picked it up and found that it was an ancient coin. We examined the coin in turn and could only recognize three Chinese characters: Sheng, Yuan and Bao. The fourth character was unidentifiable. Back at Yinchuan that night, we located an illustrated book on numismatics at a friend's house and learnt that the four Chinese characters were: Shao Sheng (the title of Emperor Zhezong) Yuan Bao (money). This meant that the coin was issued in the Northern Song period when Emperor Zhezong reigned (1086-1100).

Across the Helan Mountains

The next day we got up early in the morning and left Yinchuan while it was still dark. We drove across the old city and then across the new urban area. When the sun was about to shed its first rays of light on the earth we again passed the Western Xia Imperial Tombs. The undulating Helan Mountains stretched from north to south, as bare and plain as ever. At about 9:00 we found ourselves once more in the canyons of the Helan Mountains.



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In ancient times the Helan Mountains were considered an excellent natural barrier. The Han regimes had always made use of this fact, with the help of the Great Wall, to repulse the invading marauders of the non-Han nationalities. Yue Fei, the famous general of the Song Dynasty wrote in his poem *Manjianghong*, "I rode in a chariot and traversed the length and breadth of the Helan Mountains." It seems that the mountains were of considerable military importance in the minds of such ancient warriors as Yue Fei. However, in present-day military affairs, the Helan Mountains are of no more importance than a small hill.

On our last day in this region we crossed the Helan Mountain Pass and entered Inner Mongolia. Although we had been driving for only an hour, we noticed that the vegetation and the geographic features on the western slopes of Inner Mongolia were completely different from those on the eastern slopes in Ningxia. All around one could see a vast expanse of desert and prairie, boundless and smooth. There was little livestock except for a few camels, cattle and sheep roaming about in the wilderness. It was 11:00 in the morning when we arrived at our next destination, Alxa Left Banner (Bayan Hot), capital of Alxa League in Inner Mongolia.

Translated by Weijun Qi

A screen wall is being built at the mosque at Najiahu Village (1). Graduates from the Najiahu mosque will become professional imams and be assigned lifelong posts at mosques in other parts of the country (2). Due to the severely cold winters here, kangs (heated brick beds) are common (3). Many of these Helan rock paintings have been damaged over the centuries (4). The massive Helan Mountains, their barren slopes studded only with rocks and weeds, make one feel insignificant indeed (5).

PART EIGHT



蘇古諾爾
Sogo Nur
額濟納旗
Ejin Banner
黑城子
Heichengzi

烏力吉
Oliji

阿拉善左旗
Alxa Left Banner

A Detour Through the Desert to Etzina

When the traveller leaves this city of Kan-chau, he rides for twelve days till he reaches a city called Etzina, which lies on the northern edge of the desert of sand. This is still in the province of Tangut. The inhabitants are idolaters. They have camels and cattle in plenty.... The people live by agriculture and stock-rearing; they are not traders.

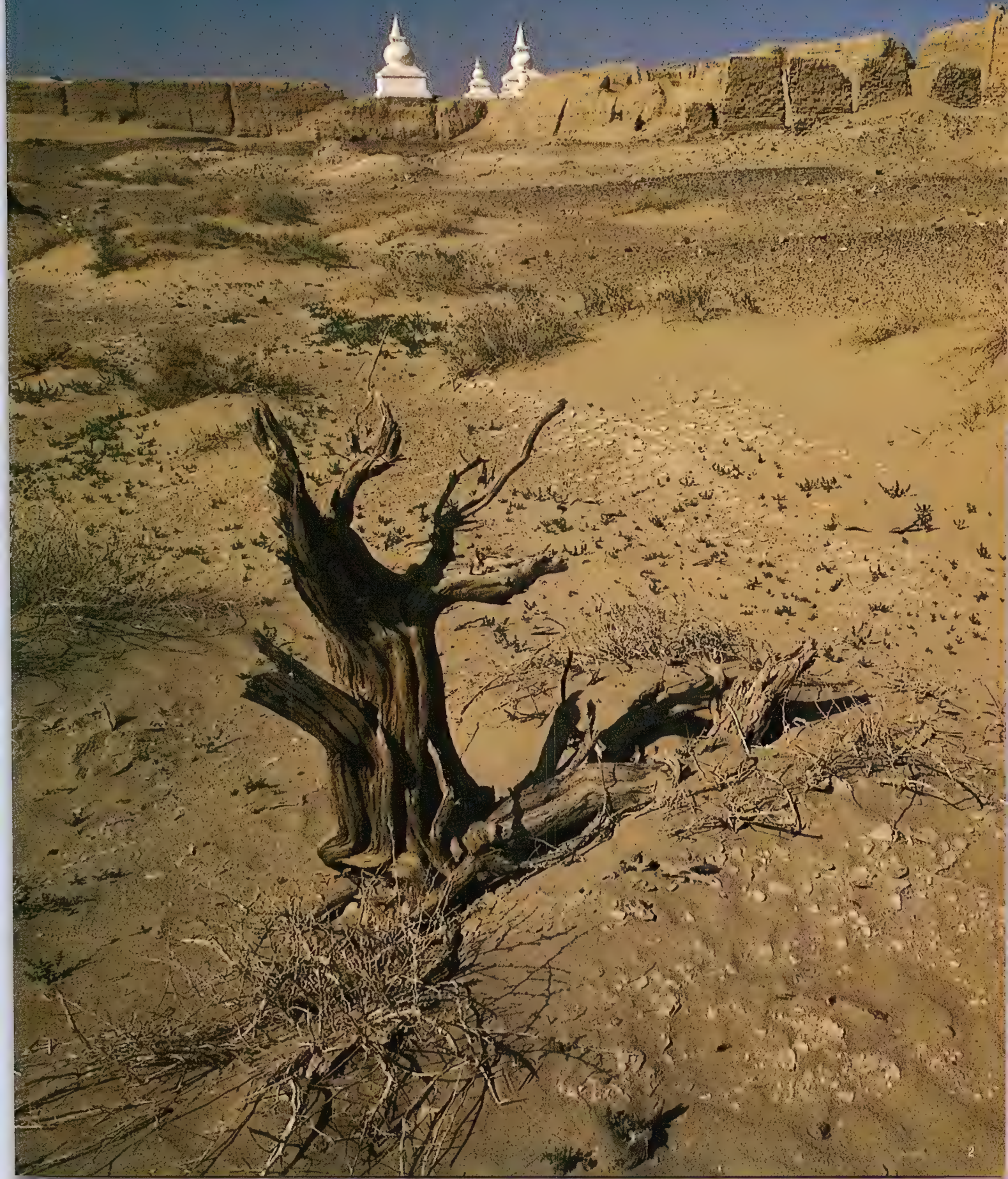
... It is a land teeming with wild life, including wild asses, and clothed with pine-woods. There are sheets of water full of pike and other fish....

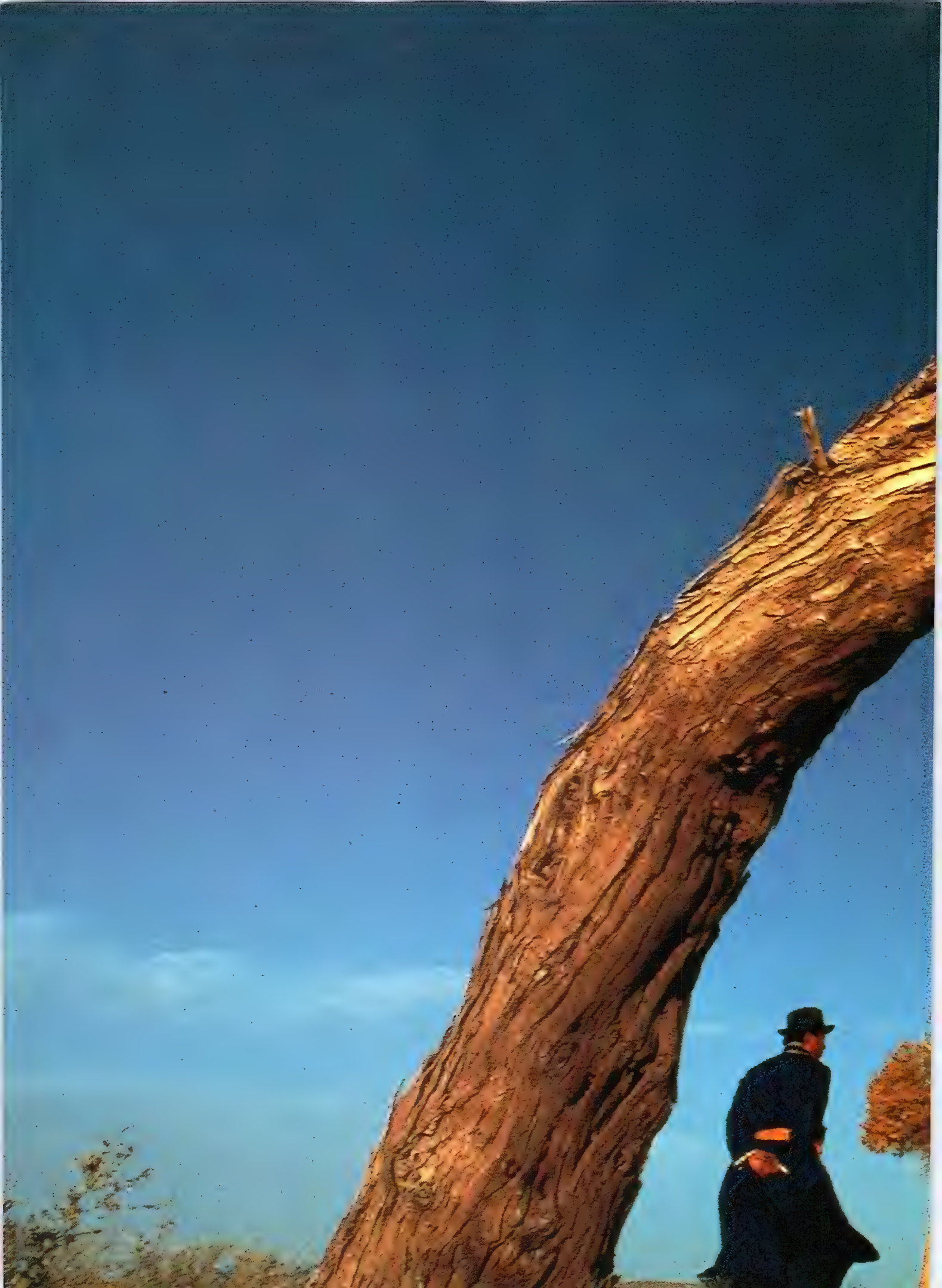
— *The Travels of Marco Polo*

Marco Polo's route did not actually take him directly from the Pamir Highland to Beijing, as our own journey would. In fact, he stayed for over a year in Kan-chau (Zhangye), during which he visited the ancient city of Etzina (located in today's Ejin Banner). After that, he continued north all the way through Russia and finally ended up at the Arctic Ocean. We decided to trace part of his detour as far as Ejin Banner, which required traversing yet another vast expanse of desert called the Badain Jaran.

The city Marco Polo called Kalachan was somewhere in today's Alxa League, a large area encompassing both Alxa Left Banner and Alxa Right Banner, a banner being equivalent to a county. Seven centuries ago Marco Polo saw a land full of wildlife, domestic animals, pine forests and lakes full of fish. Although one still sees camels, sheep and wild donkeys, the pine forests have long since disappeared, as have most of the bodies of water in the region. The two lakes just north of Ejin Banner shown on all maps of Inner Mongolia used to be one large lake. Today, however, one has completely dried up and the other seems destined to soon follow suit.

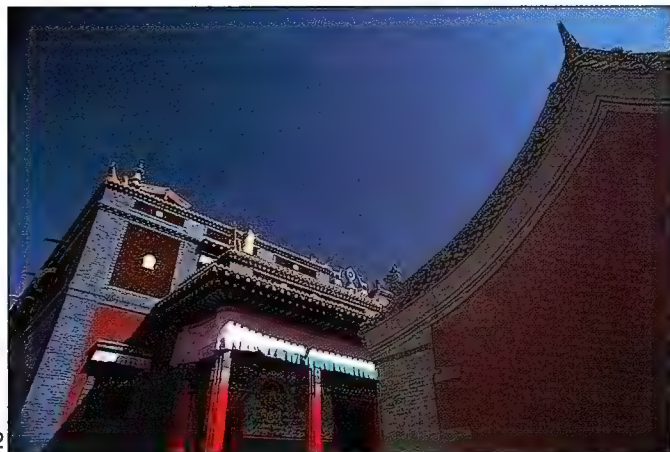
This little boy is standing in dried-up Sogo Nur, a sad reminder of its former glory (1). The ancient city of Juyan, just beside Gaxun Nur, is now known as Heichengzi. According to Marco Polo, this desolate site was once a thriving oasis with deep water, dense forests and luxuriant grasses (2).





This dead stump of an ancient diversiform-leaved poplar tree has borne witness to the vicissitudes of history, and perhaps was here even in Marco Polo's time.





The last time we travelled across a desert, we suffered from intestinal and stomach troubles and our car broke down over and over again. This time, we did not dare run the risk of cutting across the Badain Jaran Desert to Ejin Banner. Instead, starting from Yinchuan we took the State road to Ejin stopping over in Alxa Left Banner (Bayan Hot), which gave us a good chance to get to know this ancient city. We were required to go through various procedures in order to get a travel permit, which was needed because our destination was quite near the Sino-Mongolian border. Therefore, we had a free afternoon in Alxa Left Banner to visit a former prince's palace, which is now a museum of history.

As we entered the palace, we suddenly felt as if we had been there before. After going round two courtyards, we found that the layout and structure of the place was exactly the same as that of the quadrangles in Beijing—walled enclosures with houses opening onto a central courtyard. The last prince of the Alxa League married a nephew of Aisin Gioro Pu Yi, the last emperor of the Qing

Dynasty. He often went to Beijing, and fell in love with the design of Beijing's quadrangles. He employed craftsmen from Beijing to build a quadrangle for his palace, and thereafter his subjects had their own houses built according to the prince's model. In only a couple of years, quadrangles had developed to a considerable scale, once earning Alxa Left Banner the name of "Lesser Beijing". In recent years, with the construction of new blocks, many old quadrangles have been pulled down. The remaining ones are located on a plot of land in the town centre.

On display in the main hall of the museum were traditional Mongolian clothes, weapons and articles of daily use. The curator told us that the two groups of statues, each clothed in a different style, represented the two Mongolian tribal groups living in Alxa League. The residents of Ejin Banner belong to the Torhod group, while those in Alxa Left Banner, the Hosod group. The Torhod people are descendants of one of Genghis Khan's younger brothers.

Towards the end of the Ming Dynasty, the Torhod group moved about in search of pasture on the lower reaches of the Volga River, where they were discriminated against and bullied by the local Russian inhabitants. Away from their homeland and suffering many hardships, they longed to return to Etzina. Consequently, in 1771 they cast off their enslavement by the Tsarist Russian rulers and made the long, arduous journey back to their motherland. They settled down at an oasis near the source of the Ruoshui River.

In another hall we saw an exhibition on the history of Ejin, which included objects excavated from ancient fortresses. There were clay sculptures of the Buddha made in various dynasties from the Han to the Qing, porcelain, jewelry, weapons and coins. The curator told us that the ancient city of Juyan, which flourished during the Western Han Dynasty, is located in Ejin Banner and is now called Heichengzi. The ruins of beacon towers and the Great Wall run along a 200-kilometre-long stretch of desert, from Jinta County near Jiayuguan in Gansu Province to Ejin. In particular, many precious historical relics have been excavated from the large-scale ruins of Heichengzi at the northernmost end of this stretch.

Our visit at the museum over, we left the downtown area and went northwest to visit the Alxa League Camel Hair Cloth Mill. Marco Polo was profuse in his praise of the white camel hair cloth produced here. He wrote that it was exported by merchants far and wide to many countries, including Cathay (the Yellow River Valley). All the work in this mill is done by machine. In the exhibition room, we saw camel hair sweaters in various styles, and also camel hair cloth, which most likely is the curiously-named "camlets" described in his book.

Another Day in the Desert

At noon the next day we left "Lesser Beijing" and began our journey northward across the desert. Throughout the trip we saw endless desolate "grasslands", which despite the name held little of anything green. Instead, brownish-yellow camel thorn (*Alhagi pseudalhagi*) was thinly scattered among the dry land, which was covered in gravel. Occasionally camels in twos or threes were spotted wandering the distant desert. We were told that this was the season for herding camels, so all the domestic camels were let out to wander freely day and night on the vast grasslands. In early October, all the herdsman would set out in search of their camels, up to one thousand in all. Each family would then claim the ones that belonged to them.

The further we went, the worse the road became. Not only was it bumpy, but the road was also coated with sand nearly 20 centimetres thick, which enveloped our car as it sped ahead. Fortunately, the continuously heavy winds blew the dust across our car, driving away the worst of it. From time to time, our car would pass by the edge of the Tengger Desert. After several hours of bumping along on the dry and windy plateau, we saw a yurt and a

couple of houses which belonged to a road maintenance crew. The houses stood out against the vast, gently undulating land, the tallest structures to be seen for miles.

We continued driving and at last saw an oasis, where there were short trees and houses built of mud-bricks. Farmers were gathering in their crops, so we stopped to have a chat with them. It turned out that they were immigrants from Minqin County in Gansu Province. They had settled here nearly 20 years ago, as there was more farmable land than in their hometown.

Beyond the oasis, it was again a seemingly endless road through the desert. The dry, hot wind cracked our lips. We continually ate fruit and had drinks, but they did not help much. Towards sunset, our car arrived at a town called Olji. At the frontier inspection station we showed our travel permits, as is required of all cars and passengers going to Ejin. That evening we put up at a hostel in the town, still one more day's journey away from Ejin.

Along the Sino-Mongolian Border

The next day was spent travelling along the Sino-Mongolian border, an area even more desolate than our journey the day before. The land lacked even dry creepers, let alone trees. Looking north in the distance we saw tall border posts, on the top of which were log cabins on platforms also built of logs. The national flag of China flew high above, on land only ten kilometres from the Republic of Mongolia.

At about 4:00 in the afternoon we entered the Badain Jaran Desert. Unfortunately, our car was running out of fuel, although Ejin was still out of sight. We all got a bit anxious, afraid that our car might be forced to stop in this uninhabited wasteland. Luckily, a tractor appeared from behind a sand dune, so we stopped it and asked the way. We all breathed easier when we were told that the city of Ejin was only three kilometres ahead.

Our two-day, 780-kilometre ride in the desert was finally at an end. We wondered if Marco Polo had the same feeling of relief when he arrived at this oasis town after his long desert journey.

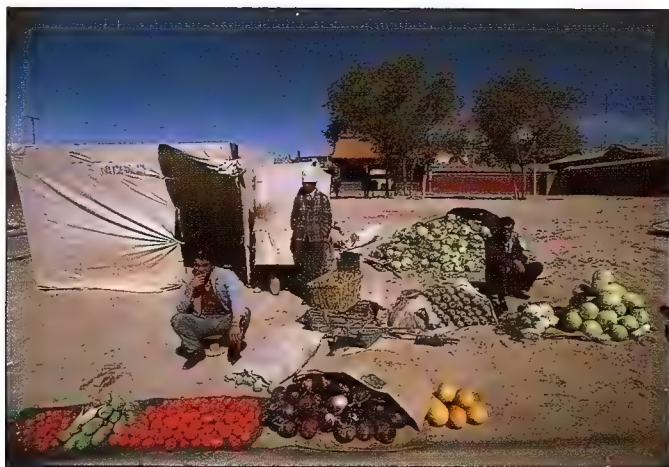
The road to Ejin was lined with trees, whose leaves were turning yellow in the autumn air. While enjoying the beautiful scenery, all at once we found ourselves in the downtown area.

Early the next morning, we drove into a forest at the end of the Ruoshui River Valley and came to an area of flowering willow bushes. The light, purplish-red flowers were in bloom and our car was surrounded by shrubs in all directions. Paths crisscrossed the clumps of bushes, causing our driver to become first puzzled and then helplessly lost. After making several turns we found ourselves back in the forest, and declared that from then on we would ask directions whenever we passed by a house. After another hour of turning about in the maze-like forest, we finally found our way out and continued on, soon coming to a dry river valley.

Along the banks of the river, the stumps of long-dead trees stood miserably on mounds, looking like a scene from the desolate landscapes of Qinghai. Suddenly, our car was overtaken by two jeeps, which we followed and used as a guide, preventing us from getting lost again in this eerie river valley.



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Nowadays, the Mongols seldom wear their national costumes except on festivals and for important ceremonies (1). Alxa Left Banner (Bayan Hot) in Alxa League is the location of what was once a prince's mansion (2). The sculptural style of this lion in the prince's mansion is rarely seen elsewhere in China (3). In the hot, arid desert we unexpectedly came upon an oasis, where immigrants from the Hexi Corridor have been living in peace and contentment for over three decades (4). Like other towns in the region, Alxa Left Banner produces many kinds of melons (5). You can hardly tell who among these children are Mongolian descendants (6).



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Heichengzi — The Ruins of an Ancient City

Our car drove south for a while, then left the dry riverbed and approached the edge of a desert. Between the riverbed and the desert stood the ruins of an ancient city. Although the top and some parts of the city walls had collapsed, the city was still intact on the whole. This was the place that we had travelled some 700 kilometres to see — the location of the ancient city of Juyan.

What is now known as Heichengzi (Black City) was built during the Western Xia Kingdom. According to historical records, a thousand years before that, Emperor Wudi (r. 140-87 B.C.) of the Western Han Dynasty sent troops here to farm and defend this area, where the northern part of the Han Dynasty Great Wall ended. According to legend, much later Heichengzi was defended by a troop commanded by a general whose nick-name was Hei (Black). While under his command, enemy troops attacked the city but failed because it was so solid and strongly fortified. Therefore the enemy turned to cutting off the water supply by stopping the flow of the Ejina River into the city.

Seeing that the water was running out and that his troops might not be able to hold out much longer, General Hei ordered his soldiers to hide all the city's treasures in a dried-up well and then tried to fight his way out, but was killed in action. Later the enemy troops captured the city and killed all its citizens and the remaining soldiers. However the enemy troops failed to find the treasure, and ever since then only the ruins of the city have remained.

Hunting for Buried Treasure

The legend about the hidden treasure has, not surprisingly, attracted many treasure hunters. Heichengzi is famous in archaeological circles because so many historical relics have been discovered here during treasure hunts. In modern times, many foreign expeditions have been to Heichengzi, among them the Russian officer P. K. Kozlov and the British "Robber of Cultural



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Relics" Mark Aurel Stein. They dug everywhere in the ruins to search for the treasure hidden by General Hei.

They never found the well but did unearth many rare sutras, documents and other relics from the Western Xia Kingdom and the Yuan Dynasty. They took away all their finds without any hesitation, and these objects are now kept in museums in Russia and Britain. Although the ancient city is now desolate and in ruins, it still attracts the attention of both archaeologists and tourists.

With great effort, we climbed the sand dunes and mounted the city wall, which was half buried by sand. In the bright sunshine, we could just make out the layout of the old city. It had been built in a rectangle and was two kilometres wide. In the middle of the east and west city walls were city gates, outside of which further walls were built to help in defence. However, the gateways had long been blocked up by sand, so we had to climb over the city wall to enter the city. Tempted by the lure of buried riches, we looked everywhere, hoping that we might chance on some remains of the treasure. We walked around and were able to roughly figure out the patterns of ancient streets and broken mud-brick walls. Eaves and pillars in alignment pierced through the drifting sand, indicating that the city had flourished in ancient times.

In fact, there were indeed quite a lot of historical relics still around. In less than an hour, our hands and pockets were full of fragments of Yuan Dynasty celadon, black porcelain and blue and



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Ejin is known as China's "home of camels" (1). These people are on their way to a hair-cutting ceremony (2). Camels are the best pack animals for crossing the desert, as they are docile and can endure hardships, hunger and thirst (3). The hair-cutting ceremony performed on all Mongolian children is as important as baptism is for Christians (4). The eldest person makes the first cut before the others follow suit, a collective act symbolizing dispelling evil (5).



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In the suburbs of Ejin Banner there is a vast stretch of grassland that looks like a plush red carpet (1). The ground at Heichengzi has been dug up numerous times by treasure hunters over the past 200 years (2). Judging from the thickness of the remaining walls, one can imagine the magnificence and prosperity of Heichengzi in its heyday (3). The Badain Jaran Desert is engulfing the oases inch by inch (4). The desert elm has adapted admirably to the harsh conditions here (5). For two days and one night we drove along this seemingly endless desert road (6). The oases in Ejin Banner are always shaded by diversiform-leaved poplar trees (7).



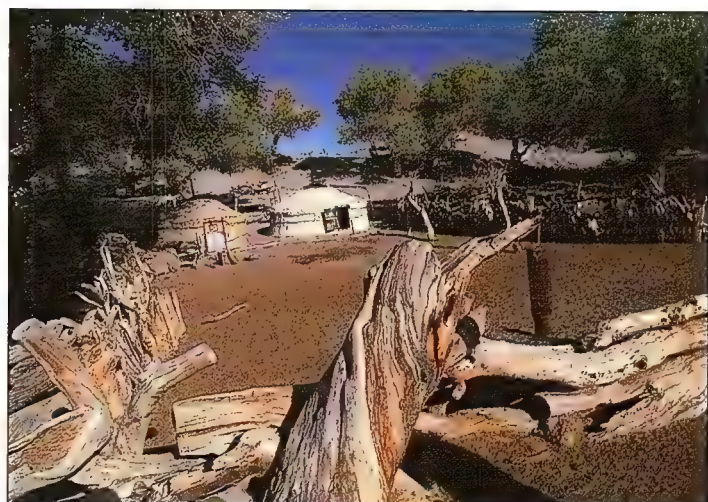
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white pottery. We also unearthed a lady's leather boot and an incomplete Yuan coin. In the southern corner of the city, we saw red clay that had been fired at high temperatures and many pieces of broken earthenware. We gathered that there must have been a pottery and porcelain workshop here at one time.

In the northwestern corner of the city, a tower with an Islamic-style dome had been repaired. When we left the city ruins, we went to a vaulted-roofed church, which stood intact 100 metres northwest of the city. As soon as we entered the church, the heat dissipated and we felt cool and refreshed.

Near Heichengzi, there is an area 40 kilometres long and 25 kilometres wide called the "secret and mysterious black sand hills". Even local herdsman get lost among these hills. In winter and spring when fierce winds blow, sand flies about and stones hurtle through the air, while sand hills shift constantly. Broken walls poke out of the sand, and some people have even glimpsed the roofs of ancient temples. Because it is so treacherous, very little is known about this unique place.

The Story of the Vanishing Lakes

When we were in Zhangye we consulted a map and saw that the Ruoshui River has its source in the Qilian Mountains, then winds north through the Hexi Corridor and into the desert. It then flows through the forests of Ejina Banner and pours into two lakes — the Gaxun Nur and the Sogo Nur.

The next morning we drove again towards the Sino-Mongolian border. This time, a little wiser than before, we took precautions by first going to a yurt to ask a Mongolian woman to be our guide. Unlike the previous day, a vast stretch of grassland took the place of forests. There were no tracks or obvious marks on the grassland, which made it even more likely that without a guide we would surely get lost.

The Mongolian woman told us that in recent years the water flowing from the south has seldom reached the lakes here, and consequently the Gaxun Nur had dried up. This summer, less water than usual had poured into the Sogo Nur, so it too was

almost empty. Some fishermen had said that the remaining pools were full of fish, so for several days trucks loaded with silver carp had been transporting them out of the area. This seemed a bad omen, and the death of the lake looked imminent.

Next, we headed northeast to visit Sogo Nur. After two hours of driving through willow bushes no more than two feet in height, we saw the white surface of a lake. A solitary thatched cottage stood by the road leading to the lake, and the sound of our engine brought a middle-aged Mongolian man out to greet us. After a short conversation, she told us that the lake had dried up just ten days earlier. However, we refused to believe him and decided to go there to see the lake with our own eyes. What we saw was an endless stretch of cracked earth, the bottom of the lake, which was covered with a coating of frostlike powder that looked like saline-alkali.

Suddenly, a vast stretch of water appeared in the distance. Our Mongolian guide thought it might be the remaining water in the lake. We drove on for a couple of kilometres only to find that the water surface disappeared before our very eyes. Then when we looked back again, we saw a stretch of water appear where we had just stopped. It was not water at all but a mirage, playing a trick on our eyes.

A Happy Township on the Grassland

Early the next morning we arrived in Jirigelantu Sumu. In Mongol this means "happy township", and the name does the town justice. Tall, thick trees joined together to shade the ground from the scorching sun. Mongolian families lived scattered under the trees. In places where there are no trees, a kind of purplish-red grass grows, which takes on a red colour quite pleasing to the eye in the morning sun, looking like a plush carpet in a fine hotel. The leaves of the plant were actually translucent stems containing a red juice. Unfortunately, we were unable to classify this lovely plant.

All the sheep pens, camel pens and donkey pens here were enclosed by five-foot fences made of tree trunks and thick branches. These primitively-made fences, a couple of yurts, and

the encircling trees with their golden leaves formed a haven of peace. As we were approaching the yurts we heard furious barks and a ferocious dog sprang out at us. Just then an old couple came out of the yurt, silenced the dog and invited us inside.

The couple were both over 70 and seemed very friendly. The old woman served us hot milk tea, which we had drunk daily since we entered Inner Mongolia. The tea is made by first brewing black tea, adding a pinch of salt and then adding some fresh goat milk or cow milk. When we first tasted the tea, we were not used to it and found it undrinkable. We thought it was interesting that just two days later, we came to savour the taste and could not do without it.

When our cups of milk tea were finished, the old man untied the snuff bottle hanging at his waist and handed it to us for a sniff. We had only read about this in novels and had never had the experience of actually using snuff. With great care and imitating the old man's example, one person in our party decided to give it a try. She wiped the mouth of the bottle with her thumb, then put the bottle to her nostril and sniffed three times. Suddenly she dashed out of the yurt and sneezed violently until she felt normal again.

The herdsmen cherish their plain-coloured snuff bottles, and always wear them at their waist. When Mongolian men meet, they give each other a sniff out of their snuff bottle. Offering the snuff bottle is also a Mongolian courtesy to express respect and good will to guests from afar.

We were interested to see that almost all the tools here were made of wood from a local species of diversiform-leaved poplar tree. In addition to the fences, pails of all sizes, grain storage tanks, tables, stools, cupboards, chests and kitchen utensils were all made of this same wood. One special feature of these homemade utensils was that all the round ones were made by hollowing out logs of various diameters, giving the objects a natural beauty.

As we were about to bid our farewell, the old man told us a valuable piece of information: a herdsmen living not far away was going to hold a ceremony that day to have his son's hair cut, and the old woman in the family was going there. It seemed like a good opportunity, so we brought her along as our guide to ensure that we would not get lost.

A Mongolian Hair-Cutting Ceremony

Before long, our car crossed a dried-up river, which the old woman said was the Angci River, which means "special" in Mongolian. The river only flows twice a year, and between winter and early April, when farmers in the upper reaches in Gansu do not water their crops, the river gets diverted here. There is enough to fill the valley, and the river becomes crowded with fish. There is no bridge over the river, so herdsmen must cross it riding on tall camels.

Along the way we met Mongolians of all ages riding on donkeys and motorcycles in the same direction as ours. Apparently, they were also going to attend the hair-cutting ceremony. When we arrived, everyone was gathered in an open area in front of two yurts and two mud-brick houses. Both animals and vehicles pulled up outside the fence, the passengers dressed in traditional Mongolian outfits. Carrying various gifts, everyone was invited into the yurt.

The hair-cutting ceremony is to the Mongolians what baptism is to Christians. The hair of all Mongolian babies, boys and girls alike, has to be allowed to grow until the boy is three and the girl is four. Then an auspicious day is chosen for a grand hair-cutting ceremony, with all the relatives and friends attending. The ceremony is a milestone, showing that the baby has reached this particular age.

The yurt was crowded with people who were sitting in two rows — males on the left and females on the right. The boy's father made an opening speech expressing his welcome and gratitude to the guests. Then a Mongolian girl came in, carrying a tray and holding a pair of scissors. The oldest and most prestigious guest made

the first cut, which was followed by everyone in turn, each cutting off a piece of hair. When the baby's hair was all cut, the host treated the guests to mutton, snacks, milk tea, cheese and fruit milk. He proposed a toast to each of his guests, one after the other. The wine was translucent, and when we drank some we found that it was neither spirit nor wine. We were told it was "milk wine" made from mare's milk.

The "wine" had gone round three times and the guests became less reserved. They began singing beautiful folk songs of blessing and praise, leaving us with yet more unforgettable memories of this ancient and mysterious land.

Translated by Chen Jiaji

Mongolian yurts are always colourfully furnished (1). In the desert a short way from Ejin Banner is a Tibetan temple (2). Camels are left free to graze on the grassland (3). This single house sits alone on the vast sands of the desert (4).

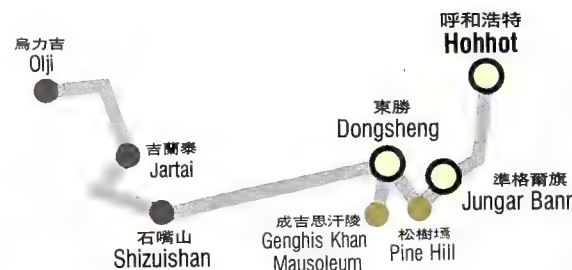


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PART NINE



The Ancient Ordos Plateau

Now it happened in the year of ... 1187 ... the Tartars chose a king to reign over them whose name in their language was Chinghiz Khan, a man of great ability and wisdom, a gifted orator and a brilliant soldier. After his election, all the Tartars in the world, dispersed as they were among various foreign countries, came to him and acknowledged his sovereignty. And he exercised it well and honourably ... so that he was loved and honoured not as a lord but as a god.

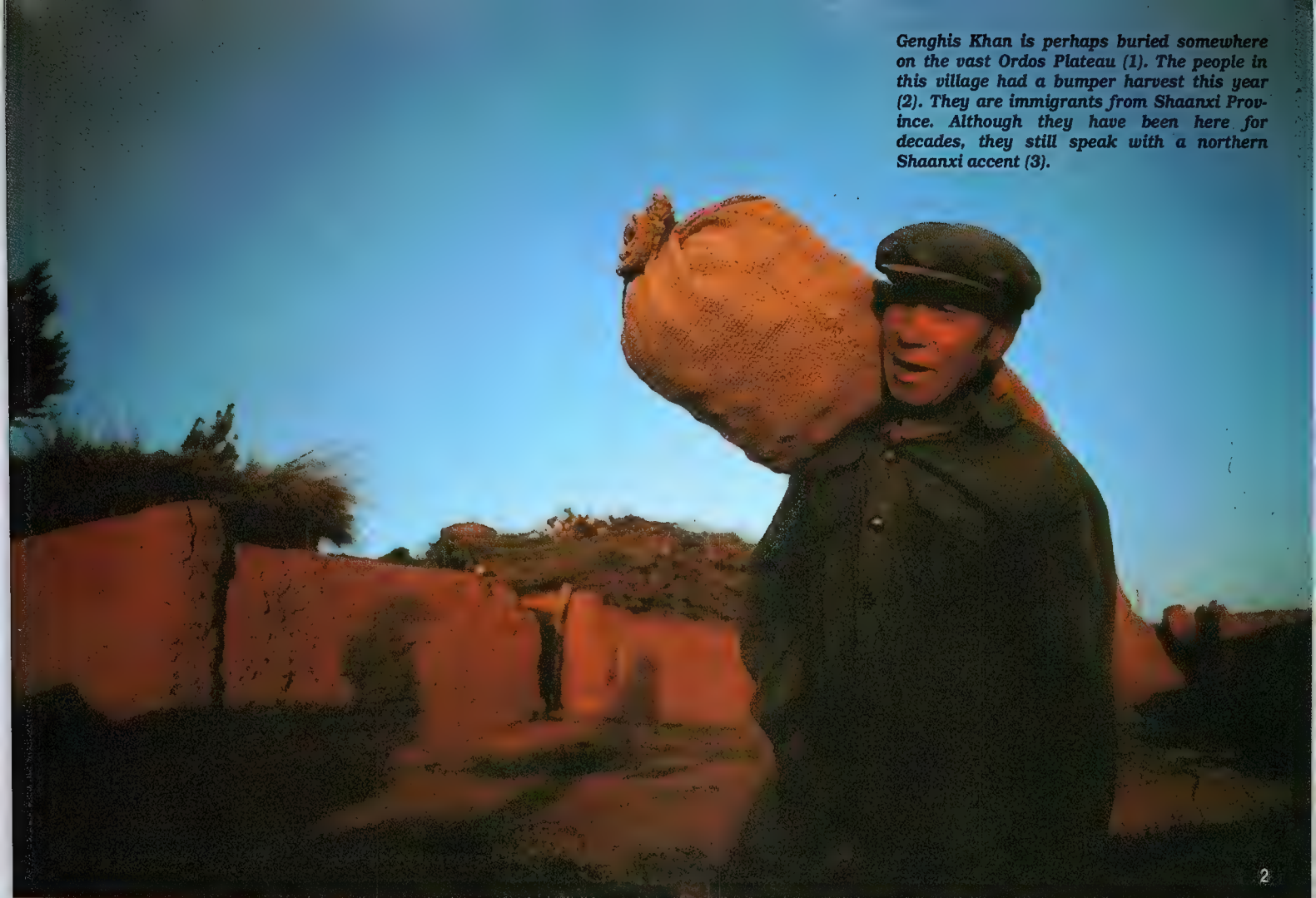
... All the great lords who are of the lineage of Chinghiz Khan are conveyed for burial to a great mountain called Altai. When one of them dies, even if it be at a distance of a hundred days' journey from this mountain, he must be brought here for burial...

— The Travels of Marco Polo

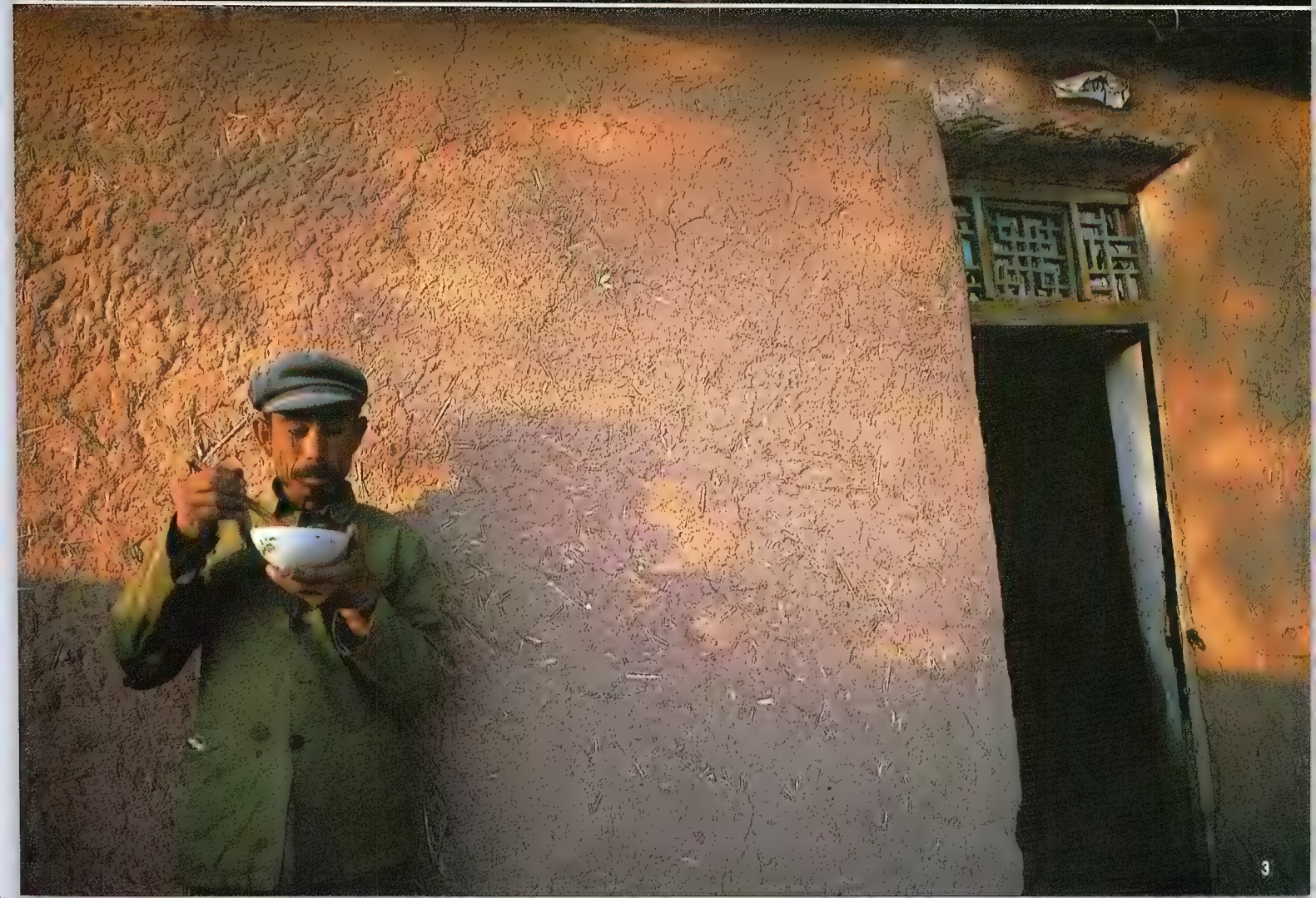
Although not entirely planned, this part of our journey brought us to the Genghis (Chinghiz) Khan Mausoleum, located in Ejin Horo Banner in Inner Mongolia. Although it is possible that Marco Polo's account of where Genghis Khan and his descendants are buried is true, no evidence of this has ever been discovered, nor have their tombs ever been found. The mausoleum we visited, therefore, did not contain the remains of the emperor, but was rather a memorial hall.

Marco Polo devoted a fair amount of space in his book in praise of Genghis Khan, although by today's standards he would hardly be considered a benevolent leader. For example, Marco Polo tells us that when Genghis Khan or one of his successors died and was being taken for burial, "all those who are encountered along the route ... are put to the sword by the attendants who are escorting it". This was because it was believed that all these people would be there to serve the emperor after death. When Genghis Khan's grandson Mongu Khan died in 1259, over 20,000 people were put to death in this way.

Genghis Khan is perhaps buried somewhere on the vast Ordos Plateau (1). The people in this village had a bumper harvest this year (2). They are immigrants from Shaanxi Province. Although they have been here for decades, they still speak with a northern Shaanxi accent (3).



2

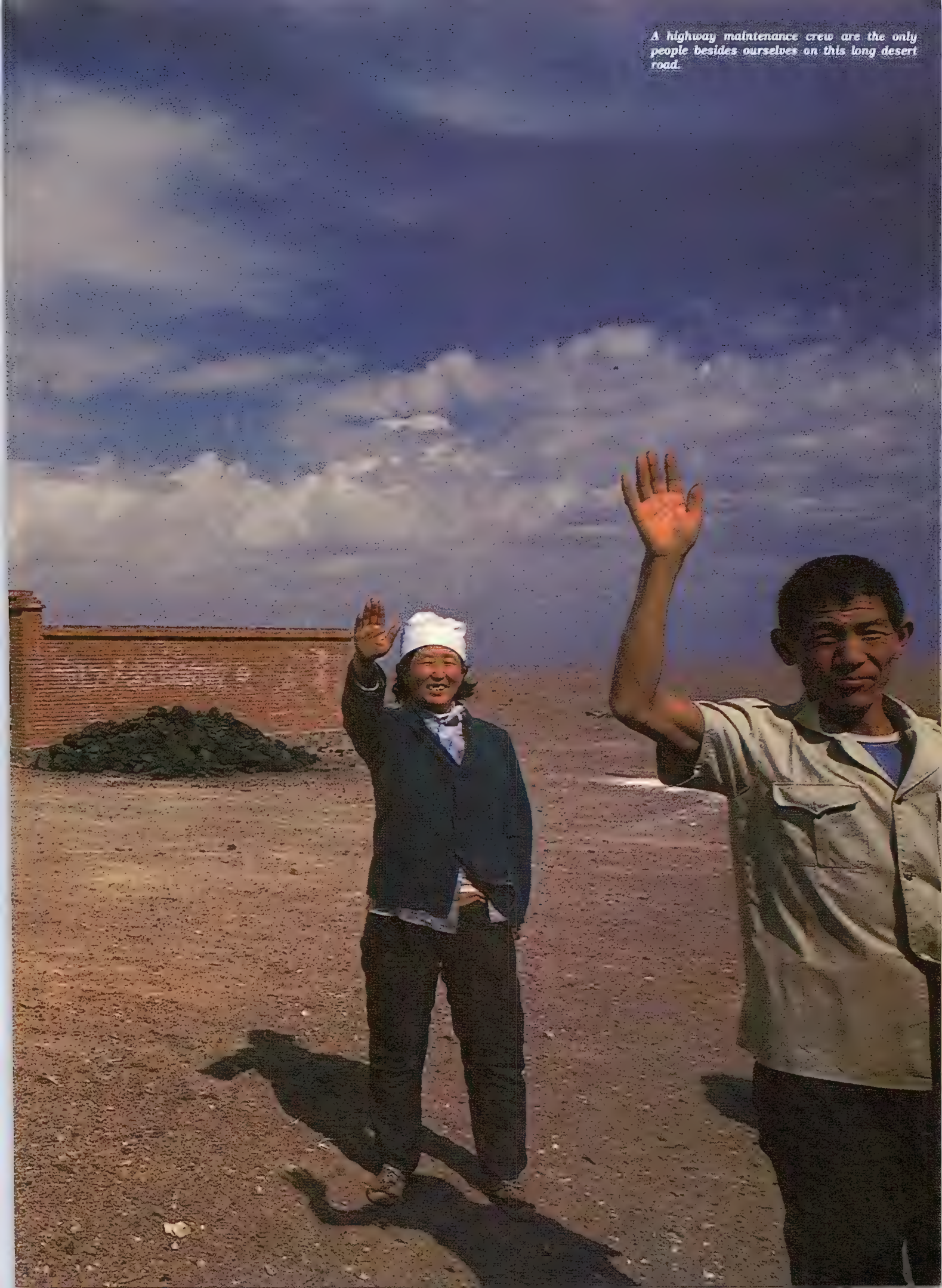


3

人们遗忘的天堂“黑道班”



A highway maintenance crew are the only people besides ourselves on this long desert road.





We left the beautiful oasis of Ejin Banner and continued our journey eastward. We planned to cover 600 kilometres in a day in order to reach Linhe, a town north of Yinchuan along the Yellow River. On the way, we came across a lone courtyard surrounded on all sides by the vast desert. On its outer wall was a slogan in big Chinese characters reading "Highway 401 Maintenance Crew — a Forgotten Paradise". Well, perhaps it was a paradise once, but no longer. Looking around, one sees no greenery, no lakes or rivers and very few birds or animals. The road past it was like a single reef in an immense ocean. Only two or three workers in charge of maintaining the dirt highway stay here all year round, no doubt a hard and lonely life.

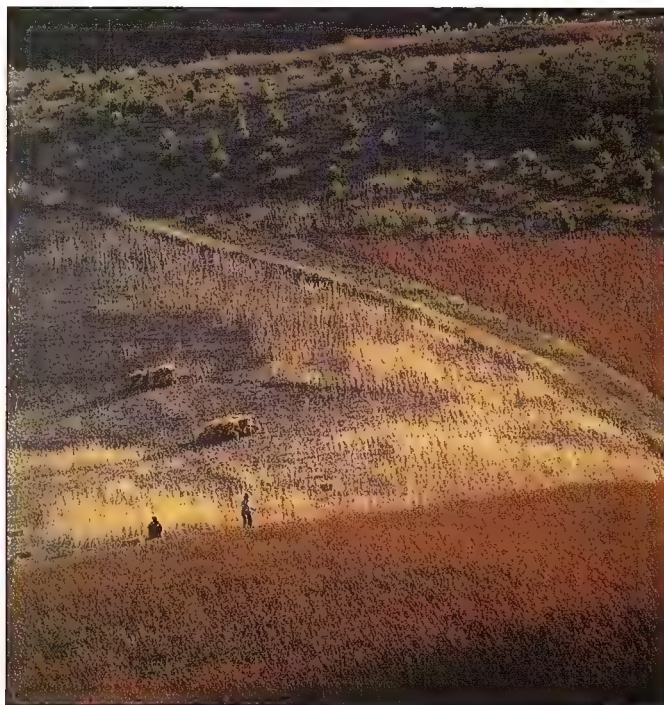
We soon reached Olji, a small town on the border with Mongolia. From here, we turned south and headed for Linhe. The scenery changed as grass, yurts and elm trees on both sides of the road came into sight. Horses, camels and flocks of sheep freely roamed on the grassland.

Marco Polo's description of the nomadic life style of the Mongolians 700 years ago, at that time known as Tartars to the Western world, is strikingly similar to that of modern times. He wrote, "They spend the winter in steppes and warm regions where there is good grazing and pasturage for their beasts. In summer they live in cool regions, among mountains and valleys, where they find water and woodland as well as pasturage.... They spend two or three months climbing steadily and grazing as they go, because if they confined their grazing to one spot there would not be grass enough for the multitude of their flocks."

"They have circular houses made of wood and covered with felt, which they carry about with them on four-wheeled wagons wherever they go. For the framework of rods is so neatly and skilfully constructed that it is light to carry. And every time they unfold their house and set it up, the door is always facing south. They also have excellent two-wheeled carts covered with black felt.... These are drawn by oxen and camels." Incredibly, almost nothing has



China's loess plateau spreads out over Shaanxi, Shanxi, Gansu and Ningxia (1). The pink colour of buckwheat adds to the many hues of autumn on the Ordos Plateau (2). The Jartai Saltworks were the first in China to be mechanized (3). Singing could be heard coming from this mountain top, serenely bathed in the evening glow (4).



2



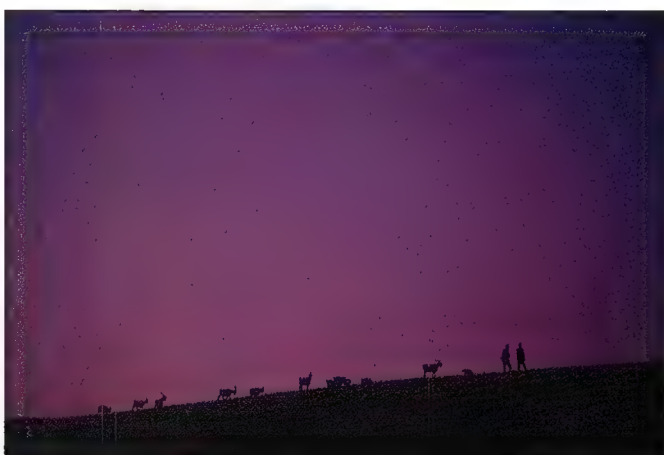
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changed over the centuries except that the two-wheeled carts are now pulled by donkeys or horses, and the people have gradually become less nomadic.

Going to Jartai by Mistake

It was getting dark, but our odometer showed that we were near our destination. The further we drove, the more grass there was, sometimes even growing on the highway. Under the glare of the car's headlamps, it looked unusually green. At last, we saw lights up ahead and stopped our car to make inquiries. We were told that in fact this was not Linhe but Jartai, a name entirely unfamiliar to us.

We looked at our map against the light of the headlamps and discovered, to our dismay, that we had taken a wrong turn. We should have continued going eastward until we reached Linhe, but instead we had made the mistake of turning south at a crossing and were now more than 200 kilometres south of our destination!



4



1



2



3



4

We had to change our plans completely, and finally decided to head to Dongsheng, a place we were all interested in visiting. We could reach the city by driving along the road leading to Wuhai and then cross the Ordos Plateau.

In his book, Marco Polo mentioned a visit he made to a place called Tenduc. Before we started our journey, a scholar told us that today's Dongsheng is the capital city of Ih Ju League (prefecture), which is probably in the same general location as the province of Tenduc of that time.

Jartai, the site of China's first mechanized saltworks, is not a big town, but all its hotels were packed with tourists. We drove around the town several times and failed to find a place to put up for the night. It was by sheer luck that we met the boss of a privately-run hotel, who managed to make arrangements for our party. The next morning we took to the road again.

We crossed the Helan Mountains, passed through Wuhai and reached Shizuishan City in the northernmost part of Ningxia. At Lasengmiao, we crossed over to the east bank of the Yellow River and swung onto Highway 109 which leads to Dongsheng, another 500 kilometres away.

A vast expanse of grassland bordered both sides of the road, however the grasses were more luxuriant on the east bank than on the west. Soon a small forest, densely-populated settlements, farmland and crops began to appear. In the evening, we passed through a village known as Sishililiangzi, where we stopped to visit some of its residents. The people here speak with a northern Shaanxi accent, as the whole village had moved here from Shenmu in Shaanxi Province. They have been engaged in farming here for more than three decades, with potatoes as their main crop.

Inhabitants of Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces migrated to the Ordos Plateau in order to make a better living. As we were approaching Dongsheng, we saw people busy doing farm work on both sides of the road. At 9:00 in the evening, we arrived at a hotel in the city.

A Modernized Genghis Khan Mausoleum

The next morning we visited the Ordos Cultural Relics Exhibition Hall, then headed for Ejin Horo Banner to have a look at the Genghis Khan Mausoleum. Along the way, two different types of terrain were visible, that of the Mongolian plateau and the loess plateau. One difference is that the hills on the loess plateau are much steeper than on the Mongolian plateau, which undulates gently along the land. This is the area known as the Ordos Plateau.

The Genghis Khan Mausoleum has attracted large numbers of tourists from home and abroad in the last few years, and Ejin Horo itself has undergone great changes because of this. Its shops, hotels, restaurants and archways are all exquisitely decorated, but the mausoleum is the most magnificent structure in the city. It consists of three unoccupied round-roofed burial chambers which stand side by side, glittering against the blue sky.

Inside, a brand new statue of the Yuan emperor greets all visitors. Murals, painted using modern techniques, decorate the walls. Glazed porcelain pieces, ornate lamps, marble pillars and mosaic tiles all add to the grandeur of the place. Unfortunately, none of it has retained, or attempted to recreate, the artistic style of the Yuan Dynasty. Instead, it is clearly a product of today's craftsmen.

According to experts at the Dongsheng Museum, Mongolian emperors were buried secretly after their death. Their coffins, like those used today by Ejin Banner herdsmen, were the hollowed-out trunks of trees. Their remains were buried either in an ancestral ground or in a spot the deceased emperor had favoured during his lifetime. After the burial, the ground was trampled down by thousands of galloping horses and turned into a hard, level surface. Then the emperor's most faithful soldiers were sent to guard the site until it was overgrown with grass. The burial ground gradually became part of the grassland over the years, so that no one would

be able to tell its exact location. After many years of painstaking conjecture, searching and digging, no trace of his grave has been found. It is still a mystery.

After leaving the modern mausoleum we took a drive into the wild grassland, where we saw a group of houses built in Yuan Dynasty style. They looked like a reminder of those bygone days, and included two huge Mongolian horse-carts, three temporary imperial palaces made of wood and a watch tower, also made of wood. We were told that this was the setting for the historical film *Marco Polo*, jointly produced by China and Italy. Though the set was newly constructed, it looked much more natural and realistic than the mausoleum. Stumbling upon this particular movie set when we did was certainly an interesting coincidence!

An Old Village and a Mystical Tree

We left Dongsheng in the morning and headed south to visit a famous temple called Jungar, about 40 kilometres away from Dongsheng. The minute we arrived in the village where the temple was, we noticed it had an ancient air about it, with few of the modern touches we had seen elsewhere. Its houses and courtyards have a history dating back 100 years, and the halls of the temple were even older. The bricks and tiles were exquisitely engraved, and the doors and window frames, though old or broken, were carved with beautiful patterns.

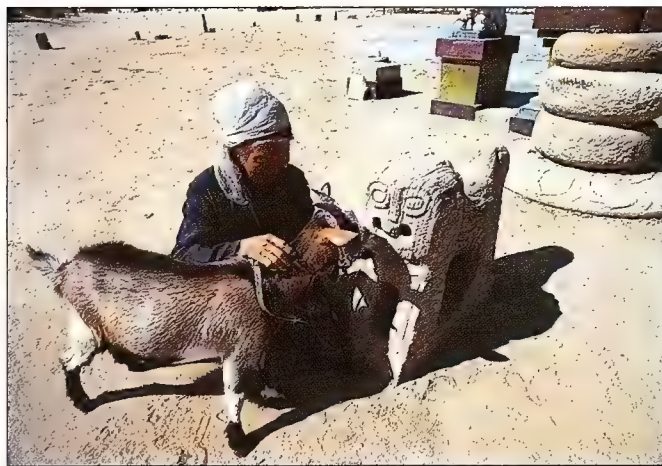
Inside the houses were large wooden cabinets painted in red, with brass decorations perhaps 50 or 60 years old. Almost all the villagers are Mongolians, but they speak Mandarin fluently, since the area is also inhabited by Han Chinese. In addition, immigrants from northern Shaanxi have had a great impact on the people here, which explains why the Mongolians in the village have taken up farming.

After leaving the Jungar Temple, we took an unfamiliar and rather dangerous road in search of "the king of the Chinese pine" in northern China. This sole tree is on a hill in the Jungar highland, and there is virtually no road leading to it. We first drove along the riverbed and then up a hill, following the ditches scoured out by the rain. The ridge of the hill was flanked by deep valleys and ahead of it were steep slopes. Many a time we felt that our search was hopeless, but there was no retreat, since it was impossible for the car to turn around on the treacherous path.

All we could do was forge ahead, when all of a sudden the car went stumbling downhill. In the deep loess canyons on both sides of the ridge, strong winds howled and eagles hovered in the air while our car took a downward plunge. We felt dizzy with fear, and it took us more than five hours to cover a distance of less than 100 kilometres. Dusk came, and at last we caught sight of the mystical tree standing alone on a hill against the setting sun.

The place, called Pine Hill, is known for this towering tree which, though more than 900 years old, still flourishes here. In the eyes of many people, it is no ordinary plant but a mystical tree, and it attracts many worshippers. A monastery has now been built around the tree, and on July 15 of every year a temple fair is held here, during which people living within a radius of several hundred kilometres come to pay homage.

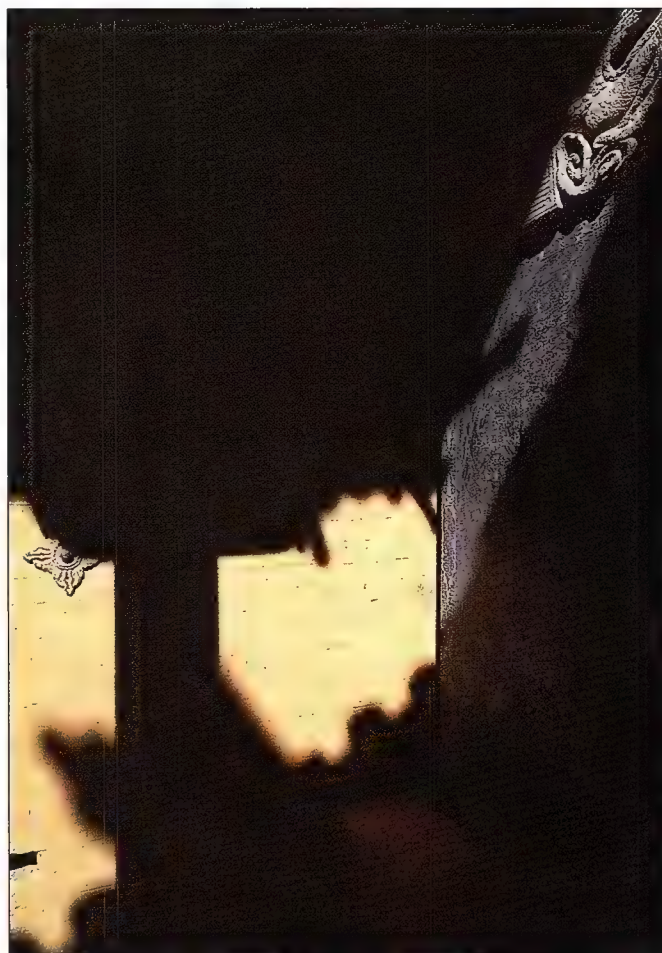
We left the tree and descended the hill. In the twilight, we saw some cave dwellings on the slope, looking even more primitive than those in northern Shaanxi. At night, we arrived at a hotel in



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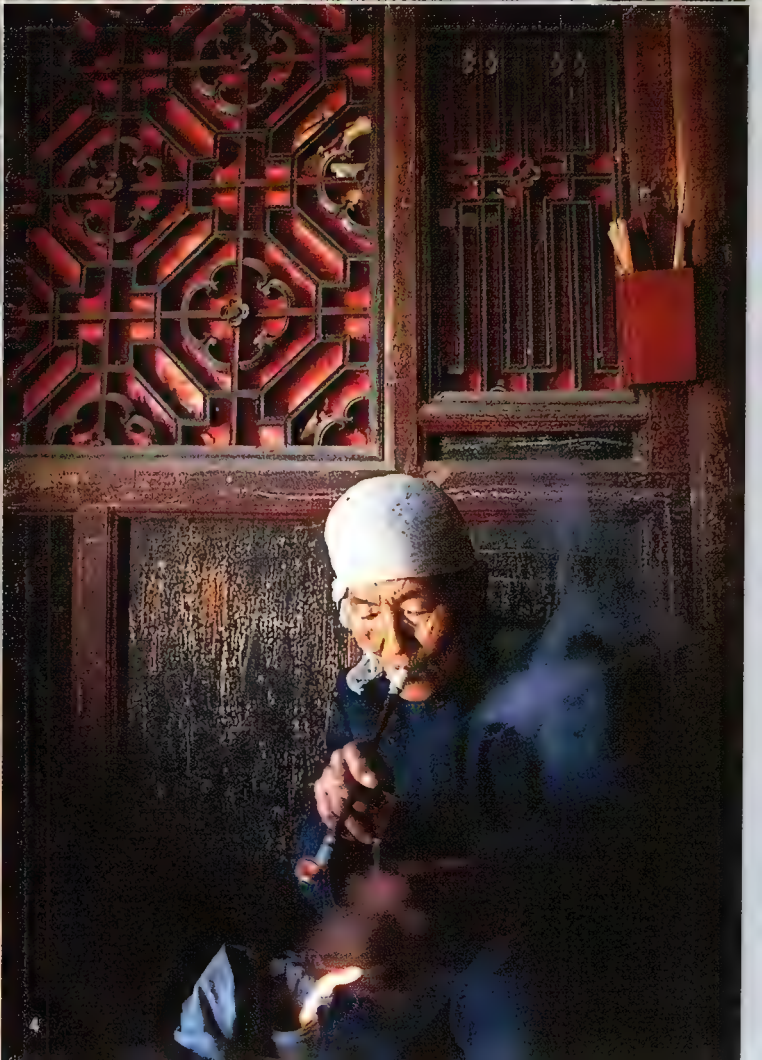
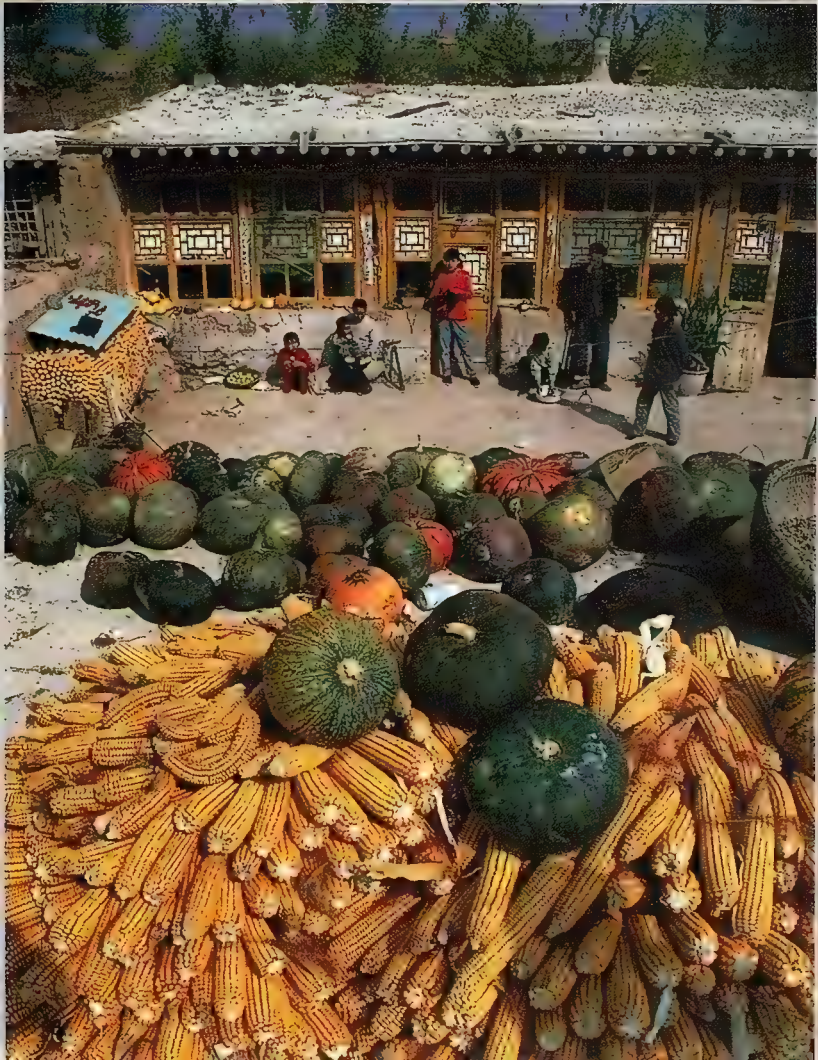
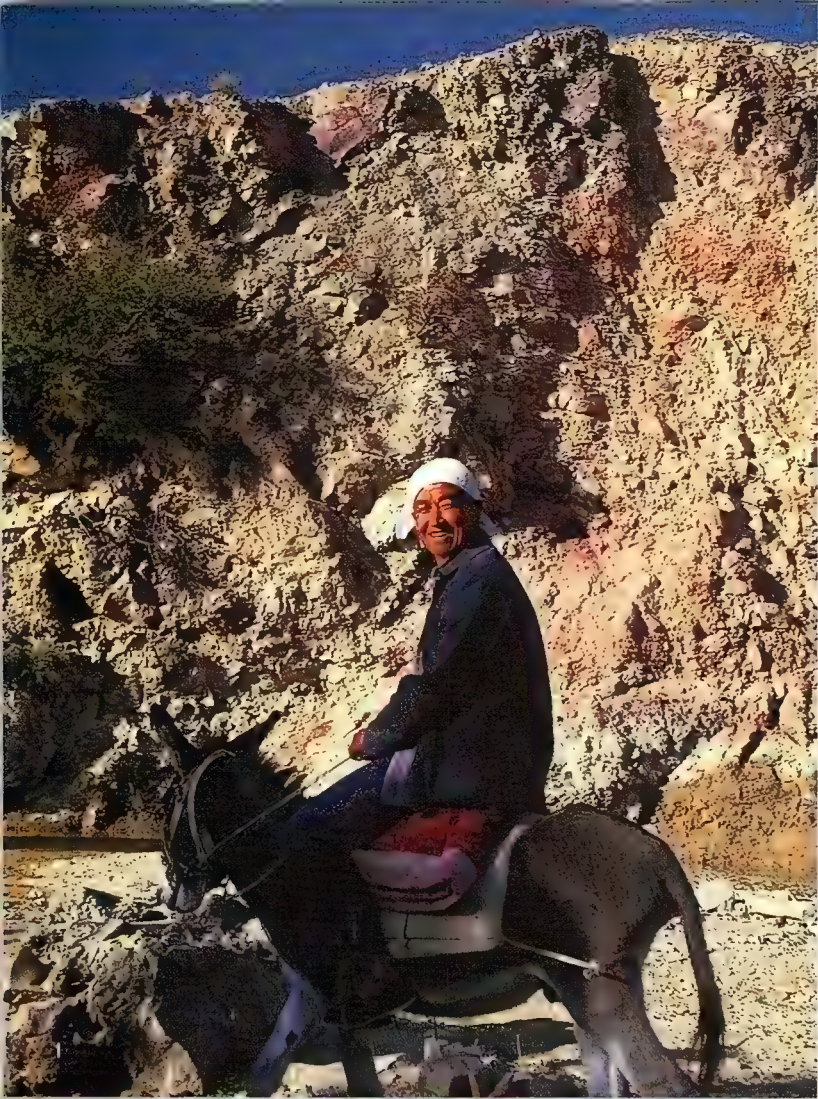


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This solitary 900-year-old Chinese pine still stands on a hill in the loess plateau (1). Among the ancient architecture around the Jungar Temple is a beautiful structure built entirely of brick (2). When not used for religious purposes, the ground in front of the temple is used as a thoroughfare and as a threshing floor (3). Genghis Khan's Mausoleum has a splendidly decorated archway (4). The stone animals in front of the Jungar Temple are now used as tethering posts (5). The face on the knob of this bell is very unusual (6). The story recounting the construction of the temple in the early Qing Dynasty is recorded on this stone tablet (7).





5

Jungar Banner. We looked at our map and discovered that Pine Hill is only a few kilometres away from northern Shaanxi.

Building Fires to Send Off the Soul

We went out for dinner and on our way back to the hotel we saw a series of small fires stretching all along one street. It is a local custom, we learned, to send off the soul of a deceased person the night before his remains are buried. The piles of burning fire indicate the route to the graveyard so that the soul will not go astray.

Since oil is used to fuel the fires, they give off clouds of unpleasant black smoke, but no one ever thinks of intervening. For the people here understand that some day, their friends and relatives will have to do the same thing for them. In *The Travels*, Marco Polo described the burial ceremonies popular during the Yuan Dynasty. What he witnessed is very similar to what is still practised today, such as sending off the soul and burning paper money for the dead.

We started out early the next morning, driving along the loess plateau not far from Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces towards the northeast. The deep canyons in the mountains here are the result of erosion by rain. The vertical mountain faces reveal the strata of age-old rocks and layers of coal. In fact there is no soil on these mountains suitable for growing crops, so this, combined with very scarce rainfall, means that the slopes are off-limits to farmers. Therefore to make ends meet, the local people raise livestock in addition to working in the flat fields. They plant mostly potatoes, melons and fruit trees.

Coalfields on the Border

We crossed the Yellow River at Lamawan and drove north on the highway along the river. All the way, we passed truck after truck

laden with coal. In the last few years, a large open-cut coal mine has been built on the border area between Shanxi and Inner Mongolia. The coal is abundant and of high quality, so the prospects for the mine are quite good.

In his book, Marco Polo also mentioned seeing coal in China. He wrote, "It is a fact that throughout the province of Cathay there is a sort of black stone, which is dug out of veins in the hillsides and burns like logs. These stones keep a fire going better than wood. I assure you that, if you put them on the fire in the evening and see that they are well alight, they will continue to burn all night, so that you will find them still glowing in the morning." From this account one can see that at the time, coal had not yet been discovered in Europe. The Chinese seem to have been using coal as fuel many years before Europeans and people elsewhere.

Very soon, we came to a plain at the Great Bend of the Yellow River. The local people call the area the Rear Great Bend to distinguish it from the Great Bend in Ningxia. The fertile plain looked endless, continuing right up to Hohhot. Both sides of the road were covered with dense forests, whose leaves were beginning to turn yellow. We had begun our journey in the Pamir Highland in mid-summer, and now it was already late autumn.

Translated by Anne Yan

This traveller is dressed like a man from northern Shaanxi, only 10 kilometres away to the south (1). The sunflower, a local product, has particularly large seeds used for making sunflower oil (2). It was a bumper harvest this autumn, the fruits of which will carry these people through the long winter months (3). Smoking a long-stemmed pipe and conversing in a perfect Shaanxi dialect, this old woman could hardly be mistaken for a Mongolian (4). An old caretaker at the Jungar Temple followed us closely for fear that we might touch the sacrificial objects (5).

PART TEN



Visiting the Yuan Capitals of Shang-tu and Khan-balik

Let us now proceed to another province farther east, called Tenduc....

This province produces lapis lazuli in plenty and of good quality, besides excellent camlets of camel hair. The inhabitants live by stock-rearing and agriculture. There is also a certain amount of commerce and industry....

When the traveller leaves this city and journeys north-north-east for three days, he comes to a city called Shang-tu, which was built by the Great Khan now reigning, whose name is Kubilai. In this city Kubilai Khan built a huge palace of marble and other ornamental stone. Its halls and chambers are all gilded, and the whole building is marvellously embellished and richly adorned. At one end it extends into the middle of the city; at the other it abuts on the city wall. At this end another wall, running out from the city wall in the direction opposite to the palace, encloses and encircles fully sixteen miles of park-land well watered with springs and streams and diversified with lawns....

You must know that for three months in the year, December, January, and February, the Great Khan lives in the capital city of Cathay, whose name is Khan-balik. In this city he has his great palace....

— The Travels of Marco Polo

The province referred to by Marco Polo as Tenduc is the region north of the Great Wall around Hohhot in Inner Mongolia's Xulun Hoh Banner. The ruins of the Great Khan's magnificent palace in Shang-tu, where Marco Polo was received by Kublai Khan, have been discovered, but there is little left except rubble and some remains of the city walls.

Marco Polo wrote, "The Great Khan stays at Shang-tu for three months in the year, June, July and August, to escape from the heat and for the sake of the recreation it affords." This tradition of emperors and empresses having a summer residence to escape the heat of the capital had been handed down over the dynasties, and continued until the Qing Dynasty with the Empress Dowager Cixi's famous Summer Palace.

Even more grand than Shang-tu, the first capital, was the Yuan Dynasty's Great Capital at Khan-balik, today's Beijing. According to Marco Polo, the Mongolian name of Khan-balik meant "the Lord's city", and was also called Taidu at that time. About this ancient capital he wrote, "The city is full of fine mansions, inns and dwelling-houses." Marco Polo stayed as Kublai Khan's guest at Khan-balik off and on for the next 17 years, making excursions into uncharted territories for the ever-curious ruler.

We arrived in Beijing, our last stop, in October, the same time of year that Marco Polo first entered the city.

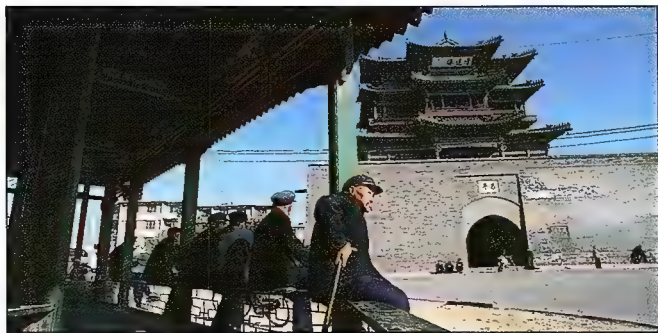
These people have no idea that they are living within the city walls of Shang-tu, the first capital of the Yuan Dynasty (1). What used to be pasture land is now being brought under cultivation (2). A beautiful view of farmland in autumn (3).





The Shandian (Lightning) River in Taibus Banner irrigates the vast Duolun Grassland (1). A small section of the white pagoda where an example of paper currency from the Yuan Dynasty was discovered (2). The temporary palace of Empress Dowager Xiao of the Liao Dynasty still stands in Guyuan County, Hebei (3). Weichang used to be imperial hunting grounds for the Yuan emperors (4). Now in ruins, Shang-tu was once described by Marco Polo as a magnificent city (5).





Marco Polo left the province of Egrigaia (present-day Ningxia), and arrived at Tenduc, the capital city of Tenduc Province. "This province produces ... excellent camlets of camels hair. The inhabitants live by ... agriculture ... commerce and industry," he wrote in his book.

The ruins of the capital of Tenduc were discovered in a place called the Ancient Fengzhou Ruins east of Hohhot, the capital of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. We reached Hohhot at mid-day and the next morning went to have a look at the ancient capital. The city of Tenduc has, of course, long since disappeared. Through the flat farm fields we could faintly see what was left of the foundation of the city wall, a grass-covered ridge so low even a toddler could effortlessly climb over it.

A Pagoda Containing Yuan Relics

Towering above the fields was a white pagoda, the only ancient structure here still intact. This white pagoda enshrines Yuan Dynasty records in various written languages. Standing 40-odd metres tall, it is a seven-storey octagonal tower made of brick. Its outer walls and the colonnade of pillars on each floor are graced with sculptures of the Buddha, the Four Devarajas (Heavenly Guardians) and ferocious-looking warriors. In the gentle morning breeze the bells suspended under the roofs tinkled lightly.

The foundation stone bore the white pagoda's official name: "The Pagoda for the Buddhavatamsakamahavajraputra-sutra". The local people simply call it "White Pagoda" for obvious reasons. The outer walls are inscribed with travellers' notes dating back to the Yuan Dynasty, in Han Chinese, Mongolian, Uygur, archaic Syrian and other languages. To our great disappointment, we failed to find any travellers' notes written in Italian. These notes are proof that in ancient times, Tenduc was a transportation hub and resting place for wayfaring merchants, monks and tourists.

Recently a banknote from the Yuan Dynasty was discovered inside the pagoda. Issued during the reign of Kublai Khan, it is believed to be the oldest banknote ever found in China. One can see the paper money on display at the museum of Hohhot.

In his book, Marco Polo gave a detailed description of the minting process used at that time: "All these papers are sealed with the seal of the Great Khan. The procedure of issue is as formal and

as authoritative as if they were made of pure gold or silver. On each piece of money several specially appointed officials write their names, each setting his own stamp. When it is completed in due form, the chief of the officials deputed by the Khan dips in cinnabar the seal or bull assigned to him and stamps it on the top of the piece of money so that the shape of the seal in vermilion remains impressed upon it. And then the money is authentic. And if anyone were to forge it, he would suffer the extreme penalty."

Interestingly enough, Marco Polo also said that whenever paper money was old and damaged, it could be brought to the mint and changed for new notes upon the payment of only three per cent. The Great Khan used the paper money in international trade and for soldiers' pay and provisions.

The Ruins of the Capital Shang-tu

We resumed our journey eastward in the morning, driving past Jining, Shangdu, Huade and Kangbao (in Hebei Province) until we arrived at Taibus Banner just across the border in Inner Mongolia. The next day we took a northeast route heading towards Xulun Hoh Banner. The land here, covered with yellow grass rustling in the high autumn wind, stretched far and wide until it reached the azure sky on the horizon. Near Shandian (Lightning) River, the mountains undulated gently, forming an imposing skyline.

Our car drove right through the city walls of what was once Shang-tu (located near present-day Duolun), the first capital of the Yuan empire. The walls were in a shambles, but the size and shape of the colossal square enclosure were discernable from the debris and the remainder of the foundations. After comparing notes with Marco Polo's book, we learned that these were the walls of the capital's imperial palace, built of marble and other ornamental stones. The city walls were further away, now reduced to nondescript dusty ridges.

Today, what met our eyes was naked wilderness. The passage of time has laid to waste the once glorious palace of the Great Khan. Only a smattering of rubble and pottery fragments stood witness to its former grandeur.

From the highland behind the city of Shang-tu we saw abodes with walls of rammed earth clustered on the hillsides. Bricks made of grass, mud and cattle dung were used to construct the courtyard walls, and the houses were so low that their roofs could be reached from the ground. In a threshing ground nearby a few farmers were grinding rape seeds with the help of bulls. They knew nothing about the capital, let alone Marco Polo. This brief encounter seemed a testament to how the memory of an all-powerful empire and its majestic capital has, over the centuries, managed to sink into oblivion.

The Great Khan's Legendary Hunting Ground

It was in the city of Shang-tu that Kublai Khan received Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco Polo. It was the second time for the two older Polos to meet the Khan, but Marco's first. The Great Khan took an immediate liking to the adventurous young man and soon made him one of his attendants, with the freedom to roam about the imperial palace and beyond.

Thus the young Polo was able to visit every corner of the city of Shang-tu, a paradise surrounded by desert on all sides. In his book he rendered an exhaustive account of the imperial palace, whose majesty and splendour made him believe that he was in the most grandiose capital city in the world. However, still ahead for him was something even more remarkable — the Great Capital of the Yuan Empire in Khan-balik, today's Beijing.

On the following day we left Shang-tu and resumed our itinerary, heading southwest into Hebei Province. Taking a turn at an intersection, our car came upon what looked like a fairyland of colourful flowers and luxuriant trees.

During the Yuan Dynasty these forests, home to numerous exotic species of animals and birds, were turned into a hunting

area. The Yuan emperors, de facto heads of all the nomadic tribes, were born game hunters. Marco Polo personally took part in many hunting excursions as an attendant to Kublai Khan. In fact he devoted a large section in his book to the details of the Great Khan's hunting activities, which usually involved having a 10,000-strong retinue in tow plus as many gerfalcons and hawks as he liked. This was also an imperial hunting ground for the emperors of the Qing Dynasty. Indeed the name of the county is Weichang, which means "Hunting Ground".

As it was October when we arrived at the ancient hunting ground, autumn had already set in. White birch trees stood nearly naked, save for a few yellow leaves hovering in the top branches. Fortunately, the other trees were still bustling with life, their thick, crimson foliage set off pleasantly by the white clouds and blue sky. It was easy to imagine why this place was once chosen as a hunting ground for the most important men in China.

The Last Stretch of Our Journey

On a November day Marco Polo accompanied Kublai Khan on his return from the city of Shang-tu to the Great Capital in Beijing. As Marco's book failed to provide any details about this route, we decided to expedite matters by taking the highway direct to Beijing.

Gradually the rolling countryside gave way to high mountains, whose gentle slopes were streaked with the long, black lines typical of ploughed farm fields in autumn. Freshly cut spring wheat lay neatly on the ridges. We knew immediately that we had entered China's farming area.

The next day in the county seat of Guyuan, we went to see what is believed to have been the temporary palace of Empress Dowager Xiao of the Liao Dynasty (916-1125). It turned out to be an ancient building with a square enclosure of brick walls topped with an impressive dome. The entire structure was supported entirely by bricks; not a single piece of wood was used.

Continuing our southward itinerary, we found ourselves amidst mountains and overhanging cliffs. In the distance, we saw a wall wind its way along the mountain ridges. This was the second Great Wall. It was built by Emperor Chengzu of the Ming Dynasty after he moved the capital city from the south to Beijing, for the purpose of warding off possible invasions by the Mongolians and other nomadic tribes from the north. To beef up the defenses of the new capital, he rebuilt the Great Wall, reinforced the section north of Beijing, and erected the second and third Great Walls, whose ends connected with the original Great Wall.

Dushikou Pass, situated at the centre point of the northernmost section of the Great Wall, was throughout history a strategic place from which to hold the enemy at bay. During the War of Resistance Against Japan, the Chinese army took advantage of the topography of this area to stage a bloody battle against the Japanese invaders. There are numerous mountain passes like Dushikou all along the way to the city of Xuanhua. The mountain town of Suoyang sits astride one of the highest mountain passages.

Like other ancient cities in China, Xuanhua is dotted with bell towers, drum towers and other buildings in the style of Ming-dynasty architecture. In the southern part of the city we saw a Catholic church, a Gothic-looking building in distinct contrast to its surroundings. In his book Marco Polo repeatedly mentioned the fact that in China there were Buddhists, Muslims and Catholics of different denominations. It is clear that under the rulers of the Yuan Dynasty, religious activities of all kinds were tolerated.

Leaving Xuanhua we set off for our final destination, Beijing, the capital of China. The road was hemmed in between the cliffs of the rolling Yanshan Mountain Range, which was covered with green pines and trees whose leaves were just turning yellow. Shortly after we drove past Huailai County we saw a very ancient-looking town, and decided to stop to stretch our legs. A stone tablet imbedded in the town wall was inscribed with the name of the town — "Crowing Rooster Post Station."

In ancient times, a post station was where government couriers changed horses or stayed overnight. Local people told us that the town wall had been face-lifted for the making of a war movie. The work had been superbly done, and it looked just like the real thing would have looked in its heyday. It is even possible that Marco Polo rested at this same post station as he accompanied the Great Khan on his return to the capital of Beijing.

After crossing Badaling and passing the Ming Tombs, we drove into what was once the capital of the Yuan Empire, Beijing. At a place called Hepingli not far from the Asian Games Village, we caught sight of a long ridge covered with tall trees stretching into the distance along the sparkling city moat. These were the remains of the walls of Khan-balik. In Chinese the name has been rendered as Hanbali, which means the "Great Khan's Eight-li Royal Compound". The magnificent structure was enclosed with a four-kilometre-long wall and deep ditches on all sides. The narrow city moat and the earth ridge overgrown with grass and trees are among the only physical reminders left today of what was the Yuan Empire, which for a time, was the largest in the world.

It was a late autumn evening when we ended our 80-day journey. We looked at our car's odometer and realized that it had taken us 12,000 kilometres, across some of China's most difficult and remote terrain. Travel-weary but happy, we felt satisfied that we had accomplished our goal. During these two and a half months, we were taken back 700 years to one of China's most fascinating periods. The influence the great explorer Marco Polo had, not only on China but the world, should not be forgotten.

Translated by Ling Yuan

The city of Xuanhua was a communication hub during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties (1). People live a leisurely life at the Crowing Rooster Post Station at Huailai in Hebei Province (2). In Inner Mongolia people have a peculiar custom of stopping people in the road to announce that there is a funeral underway (3). An autumn scene in the mountain town of Suoyang (4).



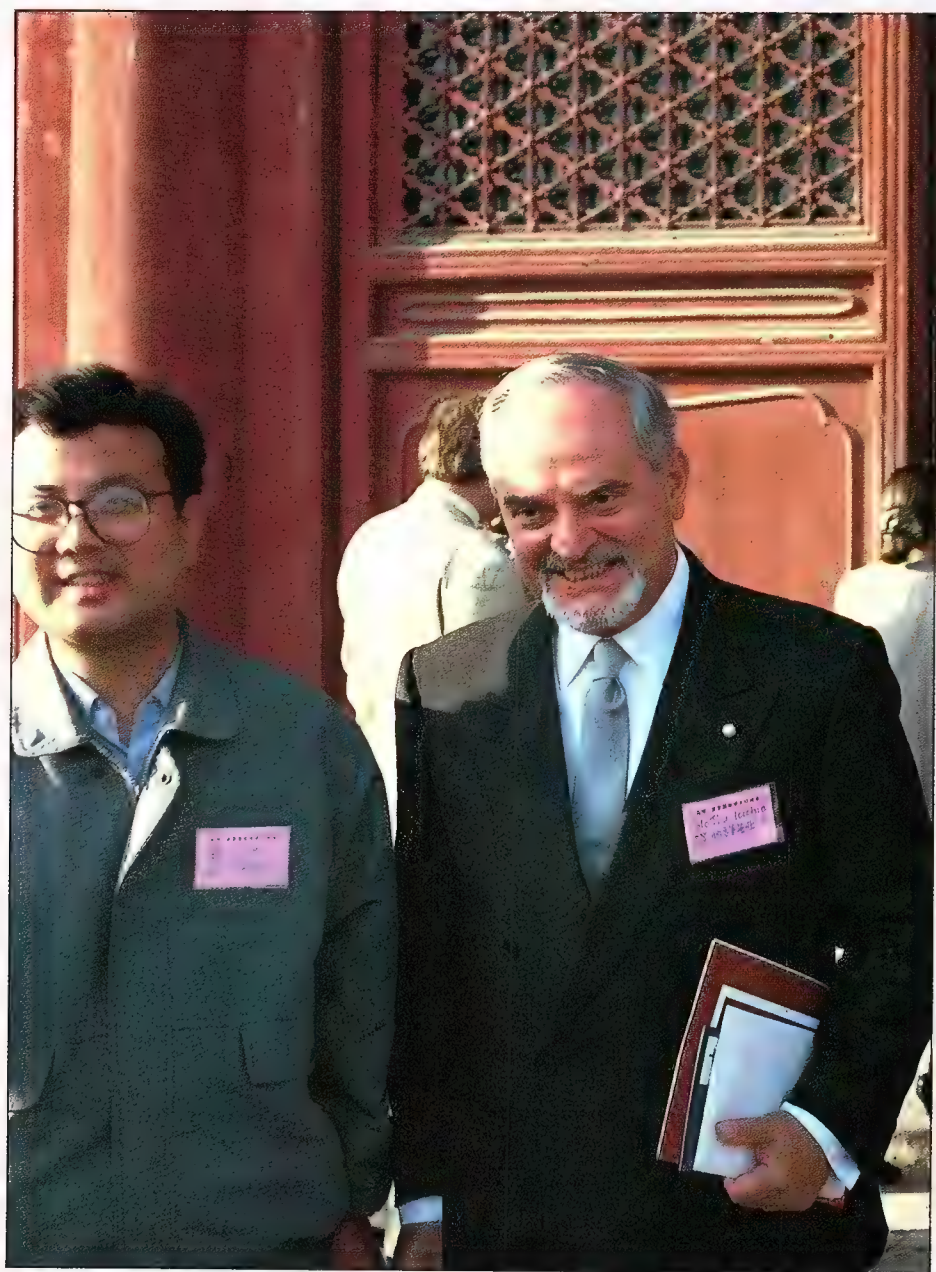
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*The Xuanhua Catholic church built in 1900
is a typical Gothic structure.*





POSTSCRIPT

We arrived in Beijing at the end of our long journey just in time to attend a symposium on *The Travels of Marco Polo* held at the Beijing Working People's Cultural Palace. Many papers were read at this unprecedented get-together of historians and scholars, held to commemorate the 700th anniversary of the return of the three Polos — Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco — from China to their native country.

It was a fortuitous occasion, because besides hearing from experts from Italy, China and other countries, we also met Mr. Padolucia Polo, one of Marco Polo's descendants. To us this symposium honouring Marco Polo's illustrious achievements was a most fitting conclusion to our trip.

When Padolucia Polo took the stage, a familiar face appeared before our eyes. He looked very much like the picture of Marco Polo in *The Travels*, the book we carried with us throughout our entire trip. It seemed like we had suddenly gone back in time 700 years.

Padolucia Polo's voice brought us back to reality. In his speech, he said that he was proud of the deeds of his ancestor and also expressed his admiration for China's beautiful scenery and her people.

Although we were not familiar with all of the arguments put forth by the experts and scholars, the names of the places he travelled to and many of his experiences were well known to all of us. Not being academics, we had our own understanding of Marco Polo's accomplishments, gained through personal, practical experience.

When we finally finished the editorial work for this issue and reflected on the 80-day adventure we had gone through, braving all sorts of difficulties, it seemed as if the event occurred ages ago. Although only one member in our party, Wang Miao, made the entire journey, the others all travelled great distances and each person fulfilled his or her individual goals.

We would therefore like to thank our steadfast travelling companions for their support and help: Wang Jianjun from Sichuan, Chang Ken from Gansu and our driver Li Jiang.

As for the jeep that carried us along thousands of kilometres of roads and desert sands, it survived the journey and is remarkably still in good condition. Thus we would also like to express our gratitude to the authorities of the automobile factory in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, who lent us the vehicle. Without it we probably would not have been able to accomplish this major undertaking.

We have represented here in words and pictures what we learned and witnessed along the way, and hope that through this, our readers will gain a better understanding of and appreciation for China's past and present.

Left: One of Marco Polo's descendants, Mr. Padolucia Polo, attended the international symposium on *The Travels*, 700 years after Marco Polo's historic journey.

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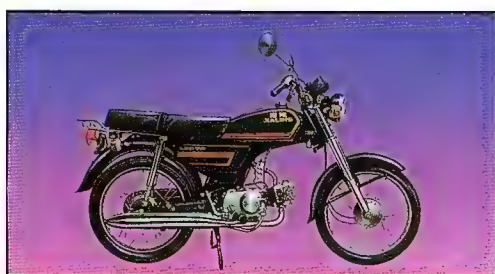
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Y 型三輥冷軋機 Y series 3-roll cold mill

由上海電纜研究所開發研制的Y型三型輥銅杆冷軋機是為上引法連鑄無氧銅杆配套使用的，用它來作為銅杆的冷加工，其優點是很明顯的：第一，用它加工後的銅杆不用中間退火可一直拉至 $\phi 0.2\text{mm}$ 細銅線，然後直接進行漆包工序，當然如果要生產 $\phi 0.1\text{mm}$ 以下的微細線，則中間退火是必需的。第二，它的適應範圍廣，進料尺寸從 $\phi 14.4\text{mm}$ 至 $\phi 25\text{mm}$ ，出料尺寸從 $\phi 6.5\text{mm}$ ~ $\phi 15\text{mm}$ 。其中 $\phi 8\text{mm}$ 以下作為拉絲的線坯。而 $\phi 8\text{mm}$ 以上是用作各種扁線線坯， $\phi 14\text{mm}$ 以上可用作機車電車線坯料之用。

The Y type 3-roll cold mill for copper rods was developed and designed by the Shanghai Electric Cable Research Institute under the Ministry of Machinery and Electrics Industry. The cold mill is used for cold rolling the oxygen-free copper rods from upward continuous casting. This cold mill has the following characteristics. The first is that the rod, after rolling, can be drawn to $\phi 0.2\text{mm}$ and enamelled without annealing. But if the enamel wire diameter is smaller than $\phi 0.1\text{mm}$, the annealing process is still needed. The second is that the cold mill has a wide range of products. The rod input diameter is from $\phi 14.4\text{mm}$ to $\phi 25\text{mm}$, and the rod output diameter is from $\phi 6.5\text{mm}$ to $\phi 15\text{mm}$. A rod with a diameter smaller than $\phi 8\text{mm}$ can be used for drawing wire. A rod with a diameter of $\phi 8\text{mm}$ to $\phi 14\text{mm}$ can be used for producing copper slabs. A rod with a diameter bigger than $\phi 14\text{mm}$ can be used for further producing electric locomotive wire.

Y 型三輥冷軋機 Y series 3-roll cold mill

型 號 Machine type	主要技術參數			年生產能力 (2 班制) Annual capacity T(two shifts)
	進杆直徑 Rod input ϕmm	出杆直徑 Rod output ϕmm	軋制道次No. Rolling pass No.	
Y3-12/255	20	6.7	12	6000-8000
Y3-8/255	17	8	8	6000
Y3-6/255	14.40	8	6	5000

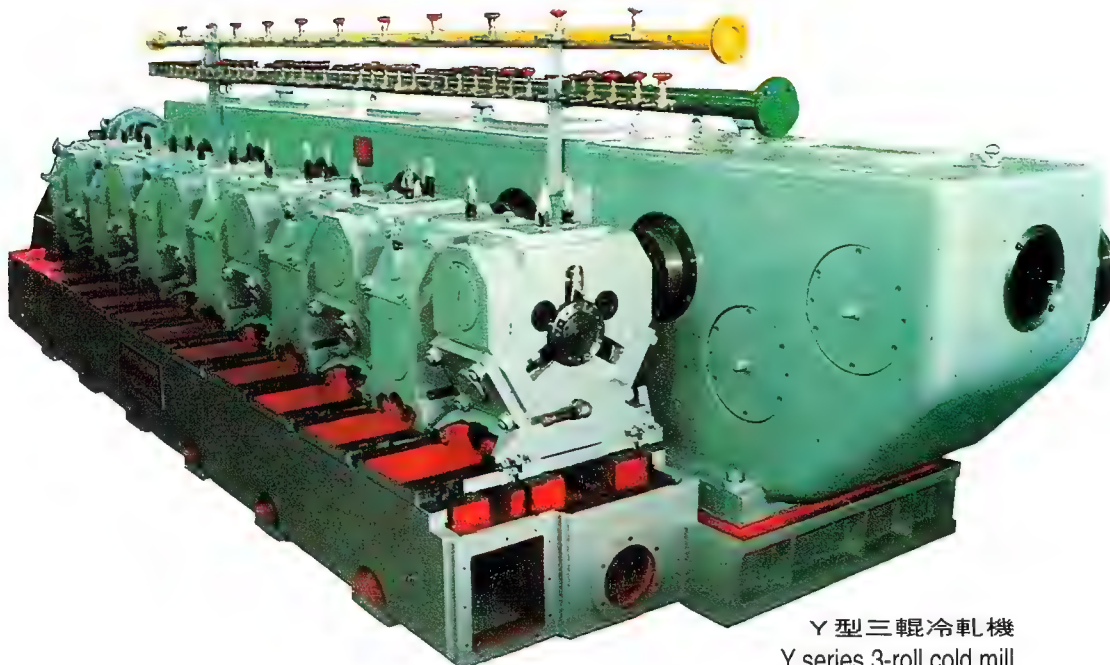
設計單位：機械電子工業部上海電纜研究所

聯繫地址：上海軍工路1000號 郵政編號：200093 聯繫人：陸濤
電話：5494605 電報：上海0984 電傳：33125 SECRI CN 傳真：5491182

Designed and developed by:

Shanghai Electric Cable Research Institute

Add: 1000 Jungong Road, Shanghai 200093 P.R.China Contact: Lu Tao
Telex: 33125 SECRI CN Fax: 5491182 Cable: 0984 Shanghai Tel: 5494605



Y 型三輥冷軋機
Y series 3-roll cold mill



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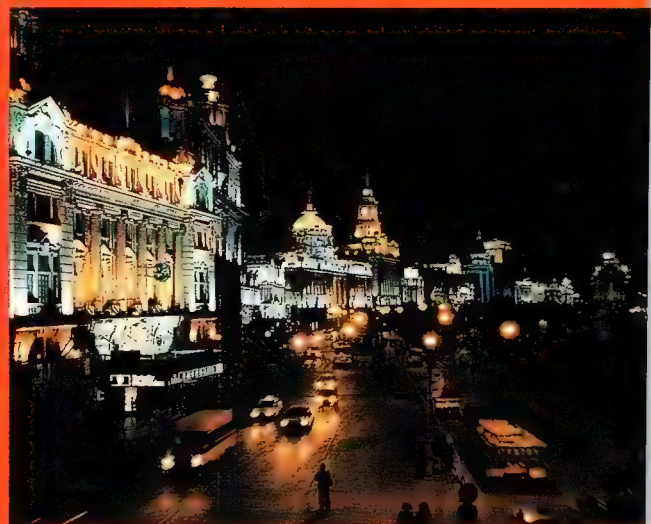
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Average Climatic Conditions Along the Route of Marco Polo in Northern China

			Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	April	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Xinjiang	Hami	Temperature (°C)	-12.2	-5.8	4.5	13.2	20.2	25.2	27.2	25.9	19.1	9.9	-0.6	-9.0
		Rainfall (mm)	1.7	1.1	1.0	2.6	2.8	6.4	5.9	5.0	3.0	2.1	1.6	1.6
	Turpan	Temperature (°C)	-9.5	-2.1	9.3	18.9	25.7	31.0	32.7	30.4	23.3	12.6	1.8	-7.2
		Rainfall (mm)	1.5	0.3	1.4	0.4	0.5	3.3	2.3	3.0	1.0	1.1	0.4	1.4
	Ürümqi	Temperature (°C)	-15.2	-12.2	0.7	10.8	18.9	23.4	25.7	23.8	17.4	8.2	-2.6	-12.0
		Rainfall (mm)	5.6	4.0	18.8	22.6	25.1	29.1	16.4	18.9	14.2	17.2	15.2	7.4
Gansu	Lanzhou	Temperature (°C)	-6.9	-2.3	5.2	11.8	16.6	20.3	22.2	21.0	15.8	9.4	1.7	-5.5
		Rainfall (mm)	1.4	2.4	8.3	17.4	36.2	32.5	63.8	85.3	49.1	24.7	5.4	1.3
	Dunhuang	Temperature (°C)	-9.3	-4.1	4.5	12.4	18.3	22.7	24.7	23.5	17.0	8.7	0.2	-0.7
		Rainfall (mm)	0.8	1.6	1.2	2.9	1.6	6.7	12.1	5.3	1.8	1.0	1.1	0.7
	Jiuquan	Temperature (°C)	-10.2	-6.9	1.9	9.0	16.0	19.8	21.4	20.6	14.3	7.1	-1.6	-8.5
		Rainfall (mm)	2.0	2.6	4.4	4.9	13.3	7.4	16.7	13.9	11.5	2.1	2.0	1.3
Inner Mongolia	Hohhot	Temperature (°C)	-13.1	-9.0	-0.3	7.9	15.3	20.1	21.9	20.1	13.8	6.5	-2.7	-11.0
		Rainfall (mm)	3.0	6.4	10.3	18.0	26.8	45.7	102.1	126.4	45.9	24.4	7.1	1.3

Flights to and from Ürümqi, Xinjiang

Route	Days of Week	Dep.	Arr.	Flight No.
Kashi — Ürümqi	1 2 3 5 7	23:20	00:55	XD9906
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	20:40	22:15	XD9902
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	23:10	00:45	XD9904
Ürümqi — Kashi	1 2 3 5 7	20:30	22:20	XD9905
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	18:00	19:50	XD9901
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	20:20	22:10	XD9903
Guangzhou — Ürümqi	1	15:55	22:05	XO9392
	3 5 7	17:00	01:05	XO9312
	2 3 5 7	14:15	19:35	XO9302
Ürümqi — Guangzhou	1	09:35	15:05	XO9391
	3 5 7	07:55	15:45	XO9311
	2 3 5 7	08:35	13:15	XO9301
Shenzhen — Ürümqi	4 6	16:15	22:55	XO9304
Ürümqi — Shenzhen	4 6	09:05	15:10	XO9303

(Valid Summer 1993)

Flights to and from Hohhot, Inner Mongolia

Route	Days of Week	Dep.	Arr.	Flight No.
Guangzhou — Hohhot	1 4	14:00	18:40	CA1382
	3 7	14:35	19:20	CA1310
Hohhot — Guangzhou	1 4	07:40	12:25	CA1381
	3 7	09:00	13:45	CA1309

(Valid Summer 1993)

Flights to and from Beijing

Route	Days of Week	Dep.	Arr.	Flight No.
Hong Kong — Beijing	4	16:20	20:25	CA1002
	1 2 3 4 6 7	19:15	22:00	CA108
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	10:20	13:15	CZ309
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	12:20	15:00	CA102
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	17:15	20:00	CA110
Beijing — Hong Kong	4	09:40	14:45	CA1001
	1 2 3 4 6 7	15:00	17:55	CA107
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	14:15	17:35	CZ310
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	07:50	10:50	CA101
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	13:00	15:55	CA109

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Changji	昌吉市	Taxkorgan	塔什庫爾干
Fukang C	阜康縣	Tajik AC	塔吉克自治縣
Hami	哈密市	Toksun C	托克遜縣
Hotan	和田市	Turpan	吐魯番市
Huocheng C	霍城縣	Ürümqi	烏魯木齊市
Karamay	克拉瑪依市	Yecheng C	葉城縣
Kashi	喀什市	Yining	伊寧市
Korla	庫爾勒市	Note: C — County AC — Autonomous County	
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Kuytun	奎屯市		
Shache C	莎車縣		

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Chengxian C	成縣	Tianshui	天水市
Dangchang C	宕昌縣	Wenxian C	文縣
Dunhuang	敦煌市	Wudu C	武都縣
Huating C	華亭縣	Wuwei	武威市
Jiayuguan	嘉峪關市	Xiahe C	夏河縣
Jinchang	金昌市	Xifeng	西峰市
Jiuquan	酒泉市	Xihe C	西和縣
Kangxian C	康縣	Yongjing C	永靖縣
Lanzhou	蘭州市	Yumen	玉門市
Lixian C	禮縣	Zhangye	張掖市
Linxia	臨夏市	Zhuguo C	舟曲縣
Minqin C	民勤縣	Note: C — County	
Minxian C	岷縣		
Pingliang	平涼市		

Ningxia's Cities and Counties Open to Foreign Tourists

Guyuan C	固原縣	Xiji C	西吉縣
Haiyuan C	海原縣	Yanchi C	鹽池縣
Lingwu C	靈武縣	Yinchuan	銀川市
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Ewenki AB	鄂溫克族	Zalantun	扎蘭屯市
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(Bird's Island on Qinghai Lake)	(青海湖鳥島)
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Hualong Hui AC	化隆回族自治縣
Huangzhong C	湟中縣
(Ta'er Temple)	(塔爾寺)
Jainca C	尖扎縣
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Ulan C	烏蘭縣
Xining	西寧市
Xunhua Salar AC	循化撒拉族自治縣

Note: C — County
AC — Autonomous County

Two New International Air Routes Open

Luoyang-Okayama This new international air route has been opened for chartered flights going to and from Okayama in Japan to Henan Province's city of Luoyang. The two became sister cities in 1981 and have since maintained close ties. This is the first time Luoyang has had a direct international chartered flight, and these flights will be the international passenger planes to land anywhere in Henan Province. The flight takes about three hours and 16 minutes one way.

Xi'an-Singapore After several months of planning, an air route was recently launched between the popular tourist destination of Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi Province, and the city-state of Singapore. This is the second international air route to Xi'an, the first one launched in October to the city of Nagoya in Japan. The flight lasts five hours and uses Airbus A310-200 planes. Starting from January 1, 1994 the flight schedules will be fixed at two per week.

Yuan Dynasty Prince's Residence Found

Neatly coinciding with this special Marco Polo issue, the ruins of a residence belonging to Prince Anxi of the Yuan Dynasty has been discovered recently on the eastern slopes of the Liupan Mountains in Ningxia. Located in southern Ningxia in the town of Kaicheng in Guyuan County, the ruins cover an area one kilometre wide and three kilometres long. Many valuable artefacts from the Yuan Dynasty have been unearthed here, including the eaves and tiles of buildings, pottery, incense burners, bronzeware, gold hat ornaments and belt buckles. Historical records show that the residence was built by Kublai Khan's third son in 1273, but was destroyed by an earthquake in 1306.

Snake Island

Snake lovers might be interested in visiting a unique island near the city of Lüshun in Liaoning Province, dubbed Snake Island. This tiny island in the Bohai Sea is home to 15,000 pallas pit vipers, and has been designated a nature reserve since 1980. The island has been partially open to the public since May 1.

Swiss Hotel in Beijing Offers Special Rates

From June 1 to September 15 of this year the Beijing Mövenpick Hotel, a Swiss-owned hotel in Beijing, is offering a special tourist package. During this period the room rates for a single or double room are US\$55 per night, and include free round-trip bus service to the airport, welcoming tea, free entry to the hotel's karaoke lounge and late check-out until 6:00 p.m. The hotel offers luxury facilities including tennis, golf, horse-riding and more. Tel: (861) 456-5588 or (852) 815-3908; Fax: (861) 456-5678 or (852) 815-3236.

Tibet to Have World's Largest Wildlife Reserve

The world's biggest wildlife nature reserve is going to be set up in Tibet, and will cover 200,000 square kilometres of land. Located on the Qiangtang Grassland in northern Tibet, the reserve will protect the region's 60 species of rare animals from hunting, including wild yaks, antelopes, snow leopards, argali, bears and others. In addition to protecting the animals, the reserve will also be a rich source of information for scholars who want to study the area's wildlife. Right now 25 per cent of Tibet's land has been turned into nature reserves, with a total area of 325,000 square kilometres.

New Museum Open in Zhejiang

A new museum opened recently in the city of Yuyao, near the coast of Zhejiang Province. Called the Hemudu Remains Museum, it has on exhibit over 6,000 artefacts discovered by local people in 1973. The artefacts, which include tools, art, household objects and traces of cultivated rice, provide proof that the Yangtze River Valley was inhabited 7,000 years ago. This discovery has disproven the theories that Chinese civilization began only in the Yellow River Valley, and that rice cultivation occurred first in India and was later introduced to China.

National Resort in Hainan

Hainan Province is soon to have another tourist resort, located 20 kilometres from the southern city of Sanya. Called the Along Bay National Resort, construction of this US\$526 million complex is to begin this year, with 80 per cent of the funds coming from overseas partners. Located in the most scenic part of Along Bay, the resort will cover 15 square kilometres, with mountains on three sides and the South China Sea on the other.

Han Tombs Discovered in Guangdong

A group of tombs from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) has been recently found in Guangdong's city of Panyu. Inside the tombs were many cultural artefacts such as pottery, disproving the theory that the area was under water 2,000 years ago. It also lends support to ancient documents which say that Panyu was once the site of the capital of the ancient Nanhai Prefecture. In the future a museum to house the artefacts will be built near the tombs.

Cultural Festivities in Guizhou

Beginning on August 8 Guizhou Province will be holding three major cultural and tourism events: the China Huangguoshu Mountain and River Tour, the China International Famous-brand Wines Festival and the International Children's Art Festival. The first will start out in Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou, and will tour the many scenic places in the region, covering the province's most famous tourist attraction, the Huangguoshu Waterfalls, plus Dianchi Lake in Yunnan, Jiuzhaigou in Sichuan and the Three Gorges in Hubei Province.

The wine festival will feature exhibits on the history of wine in China and Guizhou's local wine products, with business talks taking place at the Guizhou Provincial Exhibition Hall in Guiyang. Over 1,000 enterprises will take part with 300 projects open to foreign investment. The Children's Art Festival will also be celebrated at this time, with exhibits on the costumes and silver ornaments of Guizhou's minority people, paintings by farmers and arts and crafts. There will also be art shows for children, folk dances, acrobats, Western orchestral music and many other performances. About 5,000 visitors from China and abroad are expected to attend the festivities.

NEXT

I S S U E

Summer is here, school is out and many people are taking their summer holidays. In China, too, people in landlocked areas head for the coast, while those in the south prefer the relative cool of the northern regions. Summer is the ideal time to travel almost anywhere in China, and our next issue accordingly takes us to a wide variety of destinations — Heilongjiang in the far northeast, Inner Mongolia, the summer resorts along the Bohai Bay and the triple-city of Wuhan, each of which has its own special summer atmosphere.

• Oh! Those Lake in Heilongjiang



• Spending the Summer in Wuhan



• The Nadam Fair in Inner Mongolia

• Summer in the "Ice City" of Harbin

• Sun and Fun on North China's "Gold Coast"

Buddhist Temple Reopened

After seven years of renovation work, the Yongning Temple in Hebei's summer resort of Chengde has reopened. Located 250 kilometres from Beijing, Chengde is home to 11 temples, the Yongning Temple being the largest. Built in 1751, it consists of three large halls which contain a total of nine Buddha statues. This is the first time the temple has been opened to the public since 1949.

Qing Tombs Undergoing Renovation

A tomb belonging to Emperor Shunzhi of the Qing Dynasty, who died in 1661, is being renovated and will soon be open to the public. Located east of Beijing in Zunhua County, the tomb is one of the most magnificent of all the Qing Dynasty tombs in the area. The State allocated around US\$3 million in 1990 for restoration work, and so far 14 buildings and a newly-paved road have been completed.

Medicine and Health Festival Near Xi'an

China's first International Medicine and Health Products Festival will be held this August in Xianyang, a city in Shaanxi Province located close to Xi'an. Xianyang is home to over 70 medicine and health product manufacturers and research organizations, and has an ancient history, making it an appropriate setting for this festival.

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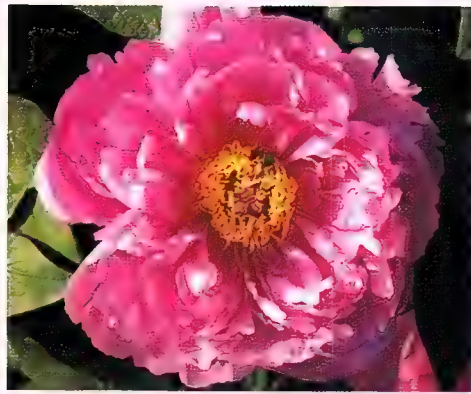
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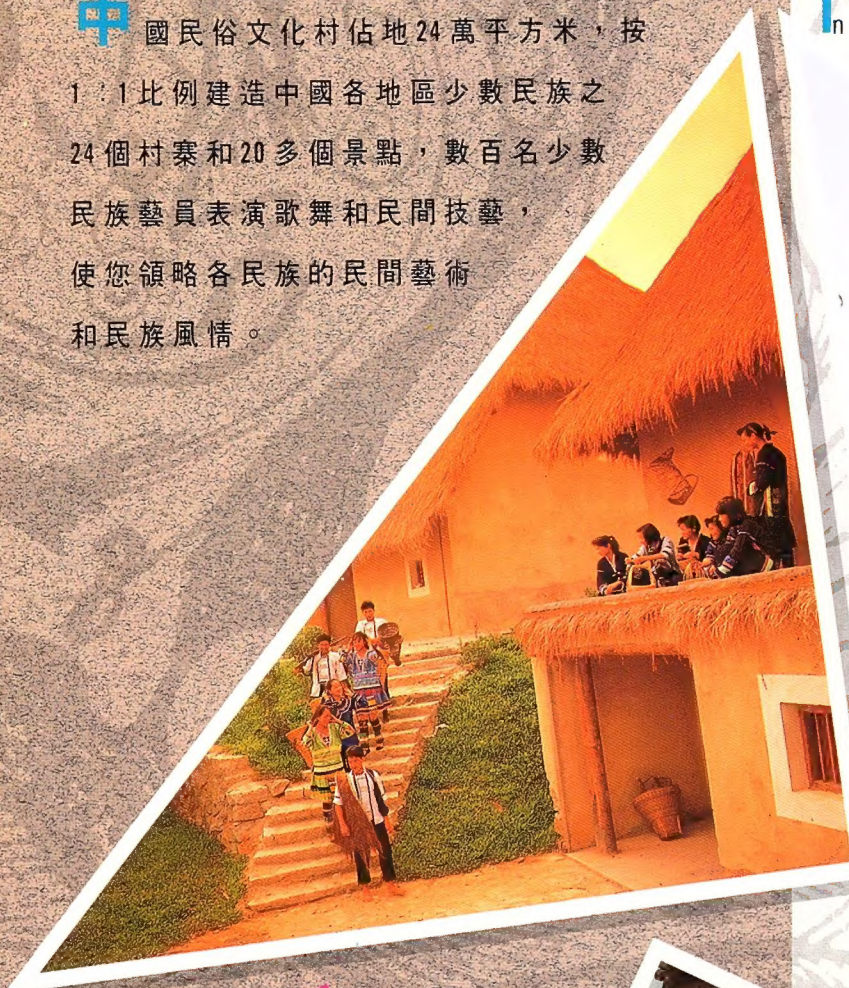
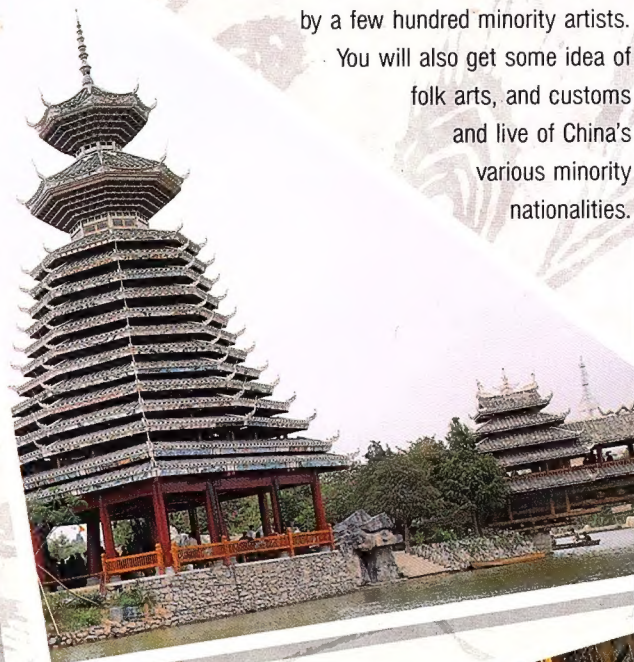


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